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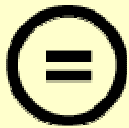
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The Willies

Hamish MacDonald

Chapter 1

Doing laundry always reminded Hugh of his mortality. One day he would die, and probably while trying to fold a fitted sheet. Or doing what he was doing now: tucking his socks together, making nice little pucks out of them. There *was* something satisfying about getting them square, with a little tongue hanging out, so that when he needed them all he had to do was give a pull and a matched pair of socks would pop open.

All those years of evolution culminating in tight sock-pucks, he thought.

He finished folding and hanging his clean clothes, then went to the kitchen of his small apartment. He took a square glass from a cupboard and held it under the tap. Water whirled through the filter and sloshed into the glass. Everyone had a filter nowadays; drinking “city water” straight wasn’t a good idea.

He sat on the couch in his living room and looked around. There wasn’t much to see: bare, beige walls, no bookshelves, no magazines. Moments like this were difficult, alone in the apartment with nothing to do. But the alternative was worse, having little bits of junk information stuck in his head — a radio jingle, an ad from the subway, the whole text of last week’s TV guide.

Hugh never forgot anything. Everything he’d experienced or given his attention to — even things he would rather forget — stayed in his head.

The mere thought of buying a radio started a song playing in his head, one he’d heard once in a mall a year ago — every word, every drum beat and guitar chord. At least he could remember the end of the song and cure himself. He sat, tapping his foot against his coffee-table, watching the bonsai there wiggle.

When the song ended, he crossed the room to his patio door and went outside. With the passing of winter, the sun was starting to work again, warming the air slightly, though the sky still had the stark grey of whites and darks washed together. He felt none of the enveloping humid invitation of a summer Sunday.

Hugh rested his glass on the concrete ledge of his patio and took a folding lawnchair from its spot against the wall. He pulled its spring-loaded jaws apart and set it down on the grass — an unlikely square patch of it on the veranda that was also the roof of his downstairs neighbour’s place. The complex he rented an apartment in looked like a child’s blocks poured out sideways, except that the blocks each overlapped in some way, forming a patio-roof combination here, a stairwell between them there.

Sitting in his lawnchair, Hugh could look out at the harbour or sideways at the Toronto skyline. He appreciated what the developers had tried to do for the waterfront in the decades since the turn of the century, like putting a giant bowl-shaped marine aquarium at the base of his building’s east side — albeit a *half-finished* aquarium. Its tanks sat dry: who could find a spare whale these days?

He stood up and leaned on the cement ledge, looking out at the lake. His drink slipped from his fingers and landed with a clunk on the ledge. Hugh gasped, reacting too slowly to have caught the glass had it fallen. He picked it up carefully and placed it on the grass before returning to his spot, leaning out to see what his glass might have hit.

This was Sunday, time off. He took a deep breath and tried to relax. The breathing felt nice, but he couldn’t help wondering what he was breathing in from the city below. He tried to still his thoughts. Nothing to do. Nothing to busy himself with. Nothing but him.

This was not the desired effect. Instead of feeling peaceful, he was unnerved, as if he’d spent the whole week sleepwalking and this was his first waking moment. His own company was too raw a thing to experience, too alien, like the sound of a word

repeated twenty times until it became nonsense. *My name is Hugh Willard. I work at a law firm.* It all sounded completely foreign to him.

He took another deep breath and sighed out loud to snap himself out of this thought-whirlpool. Sundays weren't peaceful at all. They were the most dangerous day of the week. He would gladly turn them over, let someone else live them out for him.

The phone rang inside. Saved from himself, Hugh ran in and found the phone in a corner of the couch. He picked up the little device, a smooth, palm-sized piece of coal, and looked at its underside. It read "Pritchard, Oswald". Hugh smiled and pressed the thumb-shaped button on the phone's side.

"Hi, Os," said Hugh.

"Hi, Hugh. Just calling to see if you still want to get together with Ted and me today."

"Yeah. That would be great."

"Where'd you like to go? Shopping? There's that new extension on the mall down near—"

"God, no. I don't want to go to a mall. Not today. I've seen too many ads already this week." Hugh rarely told anyone about the full extent of his memory, leaving friends to fill in the blanks about his sensitivities. He put the phone down on the chair and paced around on the grass. "Could we do something else?" he said, addressing the black lump.

"Like what?" said Oswald's voice from the phone's speaker.

"I dunno. Something... different."

"Hey, I know. There's an exhibit at the zoo today, some special thing they're doing. I can't remember what time it's at. Why don't you grab a paper and call me back? We'll meet there."

"Okay, sounds good. Talk to you in a bit." He reached forward and pressed the phone's button again to shut it off.

He shuffled in his pyjama-bottoms and T-shirt through the apartment and out into the walkway. As he expected, Mr. Clarke next door was away for the weekend: his newspaper still lay in front of his door. *Clarke can live here and go on vacation,* Hugh thought, *I can barely even afford the living here part.* He'd figured a place of his own would make him feel like he'd arrived, but the subsequent financial difficulties just made him more aware of how much further he had to go.

Assuming he was going somewhere. Assuming he would 'arrive' at all.

He shook his head. *More useless Sunday thoughts.* He shuffled through the chilly air to his neighbour's door and grabbed the newspaper. Its headline declared "First Panda Clone at Zoo Today". He lowered his head, squinted his eyes at the article, then folded the newspaper back up and dropped it on the floor. He didn't need the paper anymore: the damned article was in his head for good.

~

Hugh crossed the street to the subway platform. The Green Rocket, the eco-friendly transit line that ran along the harbourfront, was much maligned for its cost, but Hugh preferred the sharp contours of its new silver and green cars to the old Red Rockets that still clattered through the city.

The streetcar pulled up and the doors opened. Oh no, he thought, the car was packed with people, family-type people with noisy crying children and, worse, excited children. The ride to the zoo was a long one, and now he regretted letting his friends talk him into meeting them there.

~

Hugh remembered the admission being much cheaper. But then, the last time he'd been to the zoo he was in a stroller. He pushed through the turnstile and walked quickly through the crowd gathered inside the entrance until he reached an edge where he could get his bearings. A boy bumped into him, then said, "Sorry, Mister." Hugh wondered when he'd become a "mister" without noticing.

On the other side of the crowd stood a pair of men, one tall and gangly, the other with a physique like a tree trunk. The tall one spotted Hugh and waved, his face opening into an overstated smile. He gave a 'come over here' wave to Hugh as he tapped his partner and to point him out.

Hugh's patience wore thin as he navigated his way through the crowd, buying passage with 'excuse me's. He forced himself to smile when he reached the other shore and got within speaking range.

"Hel-lo," said the lanky one, leaning down to kiss Hugh on either cheek.

"Hi, Os," said Hugh, embarrassed by the kisses, reciprocating with a back-slapping hug. He turned to Oswald's partner, Ted, and extended a hand to him. Ted took it in his large square fist and gave a healthy squeeze. There was some trick to handshakes like Ted's that left his hand mechanically unable to respond, a withered piece of pink spinach with which to announce himself.

"They're not bringing the panda out for another hour," said Ted, releasing Hugh's hand, "so let's look around the rest of the zoo till then." He didn't wait for the others to respond before turning and heading into the park, and they followed. Ted wore a tank top. *Why*, Hugh wondered, *do all back-hairy men wear tank tops?* Tufts of fur covered him right up to the arbitrary level on his neck where he clear-cut with a razor every morning. The top of his head, however, was lightly ringed with black chick-fluff.

Oswald ran up beside Ted and put an arm around his shoulder. His tall frame topped with a thick pile of wavy blonde hair completed Hugh's picture of the couple. He'd known them since he'd moved downtown and lived for a while in the building next to their bed and breakfast. Sometimes they were too much — or, rather, Oswald was too much. Hugh wondered how Ted the tough little contractor ever wound up with such a strange, feathery bird. But they'd been loyal friends to him, so loyal that he felt bad for dropping in and out of their lives as it suited him.

"So what's the big deal with this koala thing, anyway?" asked Oswald, turning back to Hugh.

"It's a panda," Hugh replied, then quoted the newspaper article verbatim without making any attempt at remembering, telling about the difficulty getting pandas to breed, their eventual extinction, and the decision to apply for clemency from the Asilomar 2 Treaty in order to create a clone. The application was approved, but conventional cloning techniques failed to produce any offspring. "Clone," Hugh continued, "from the Greek *klwn* meaning 'twig' has come to refer to asexual reproduction. It occurs naturally with plant cuttings and in some animals like the armadillo that produce genetically identical twins in every litter. But what's special about this panda is that it doesn't have a mother. Scientists froze an egg from the last female panda before she died. Then they generated the genetic code for a whole panda, inserted it into the egg, and brought it to term."

"Sounds complicated," said Oswald. Ted had already lost interest and wandered away to the concession stand.

"Well—" Hugh was about to resume the recitation, but was distracted by a typo in the article. He could picture it there in the second-last paragraph. He looked up at Oswald, who seemed genuinely interested in understanding what they were about to see. Hugh felt embarrassed; he didn't like it when people noticed his mem-

ory. Merely remembering didn't mean he *understood*. All his life others had mistaken his memory for extreme intelligence, but he was all too aware of being quite ordinary in that respect.

"You know, Oswald, I barely understand it myself." He combed a hand through the mess of soft brown hair at the top of his high forehead, pushing it over to one side. He cocked his head and looked up at Oswald. "I think it's like a craps game. Normally, with two parents, each of their genes is like one of the dice. You roll them together, and you're going to get different combinations. But when you make a clone, the dice are already down — you've got an adult. You can just pick up those dice and put them back down again."

"Okay, I get that," said Oswald. Hugh was glad because he couldn't think of another analogy. "So why don't they do this all the time?"

"The article I read this afternoon talked about Asilomar 2, that international treaty to stop genetic research. After all the stuff that went wrong, with Dolly the sheep dying, gene therapy killing people, and then that cult that kept trying to make babies, the consensus was that cloning is just too dangerous."

"Besides which, it doesn't work," interjected Ted as he joined them, handing them each a white paper bag of popcorn. "They tried this panda a thousand times and the things kept dying before they were born." He led them forward, down a small asphalt path with faded animal footprints of different colours on it.

"Right," said Hugh, "until this new group submitted an offer to produce a panda clone. But they'd only do it on the condition that they wouldn't have to say who they were or how they did it. No one's even been able to see the thing before today, other than the handlers, so there are a lot of skeptics in the crowd."

A little man pushed his way past them, muttering urgently to himself. He wore a long, dark green padded overcoat. *Hallmark of the insane*, thought Hugh, *the year-round parka*.

They walked in respectful silence past the lions' den, an attempt at a savanna that looked more like a dead lawn. The cats, more grey than lion-coloured lay around in a bored and melted-looking state. Oswald was the first to speak: "I always forget how pathetic-looking zoo animals are." As if in defiance, one of the lionesses got up and stretched, unfortunately revealing a large patch of mange on her hind quarters. Oswald turned to them with one long hand up as a blinker. "This is making me sad. Can we go to the gift shop or something?" They agreed, and took the closest route back, which, unfortunately, led them past a flock of flamingos that looked over-laundered.

~

A thick crowd surrounded the panda display, which was curiously better-kept than the other faux landscapes. Bamboo trees stood in a semblance of wildness around a small pond, some soft ground, and a man-made stone cave. Hugh asked the woman next to him where the panda was. Apparently, she said, it was shy, and didn't want to come out of the cave on cue. One of the handlers had gone in a moment ago to "encourage" it out.

Throngs of media representatives gathered around with their cameras poised. One reporter looked disgusted with this 'human interest' waste of her time, dragging long and hard on a cigarette she hid from view of the crowd, lest she get caught and fined. When her cameraman suddenly pointed toward the cave, she threw her smoke to the ground and stood instantly upright, ready to make comment.

A tiny patch of black fur emerged from the mouth of the cave. Then it disappeared again. The crowd shuffled restlessly. One father at the back yelled, "Come on

already!" The panda lurched out of the cave, looking back inside with panda indignation. Flashes went off, children cheered, and reporters started their monologues to their cameras.

"It *is* cute," said Oswald.

"Should be," said Ted. "Most expensive friggin' panda in the world."

"It's the *only* panda in the world," said Hugh, wondering what he thought about all this. Before he had a chance to decide, something tore through the air by his head and shot over the crowd. The panda bear exploded all over the onlookers in a rain of fur, blood, and meat. Parents pulled their crying children to the ground, others ran away in random directions.

Oswald screamed as Ted pulled him away. Hugh ran after them. Crouched in the bushes, they tried to figure out what was happening.

Ted held Oswald, calming him down. Hugh glanced at the gift store T-shirt Oswald wore, baby blue with a cartoon panda face in the middle and the name "Yung-Yung" written under it. He tried not to react, but Oswald saw the expression on his face and looked down. There, in the middle of the shirt, clung a furry white piece of Yung-Yung meat.

Oswald screamed again.

Chapter 2

Simon tested his shoes against the fake grass. It lay badly on the hockey rink floor, as he feared it would — one more thing to take into consideration as he faced his opponent, a guy someone had the ingenuity to nickname “Red” on account of his hair.

Simon felt confident as he adjusted his lacrosse stick in his hands. The referee approached with the ball. Simon and the other runner crouched down to the floor and held their sticks together, staring each other down. Red made a threatening, growling face. It was sudden-death overtime with a score of 15-15, and Red clearly meant business. Simon smirked in response. Tough had nothing to do with it. It was a matter of playing well. And that, Simon knew, was exactly what he did.

The referee placed the ball on their sticks, walked backwards, and blew his whistle. Simon made an aggressive move, then let Red have the ball. Red looked at the ball in the net at the end of his stick, then up at Simon, bewildered. Simon twisted his stick around Red's, parrying like a swordsman. He spun around and showed Red his stick: now he had the ball. Simon ran backwards, towards his team's net, smiling. Red lunged, but Simon blocked, pushed Red away, then showed him his net: empty.

Simon's team-mate Mark ran down the field with the ball Simon had handed off to him during his spin. Runners from the opposing team converged on Mark as he approached the net. He looked around frantically for someone to pass to, knowing he would be attacked before he got anywhere near the crease. Nick raised his stick in a “send it here” gesture. Mark started to hurl the ball to Nick, but before he finished the throw got smashed across the chest with the broad side of a stick. The ball flew high. Nick reached out for the ball, but tipped it further up into the air.

A player from the other team slashed his stick through the air, looking like he'd knock the ball to the ground. But with a small twist, he scooped up the ball and ran full-tilt towards the net on the opposite side of the field.

The crowd cheered. Simon quickly stole a look at them sitting in the stands under the blazing pot lamps. Despite the lights, the air in the arena was cool, and chilled the sweat on his face. His jersey and shorts stuck to him, and his knee throbbed where it bled from a fall in the first quarter. All these sensations occurred in a heartbeat, a heartbeat he savoured.

The few hundred people who'd shown up for this game, early in the season, made a surprising amount of sound, a sound that was calling for Simon's team to lose. From the corner of his eye, he spotted his wife in the stands. No time for that distraction, he thought, he'd get enough of her after the game. He shifted his gaze to his team's coach on the sidelines. The coach made a complex series of gestures to him, waving both hands towards their goal, then chopping one hand against the back of the other wrist. Simon nodded and ran in the direction of his own net.

He ran as fast as he could, passing his own team-mates and the opposing players, until he could almost reach the man with the ball. Simon, a midfielder, couldn't go into the third of the field nearest his goal. Simon called to Rich, the defensive runner closest to the goalie, and made a gesture with his stick. Rich nodded, ran headlong toward the player, and cross-checked him. The runner's momentum caused both players to tumble to the ground in a mess of limbs, helmets, shins, shoes, and sticks. The ball flew wild into the midfield. Simon, still running, scooped the ball from the ground as he turned back for a dash to the other side.

The shot-clock started in his head. He had thirty seconds to make a play, or his team would lose possession of the ball. His team-mates appeared from everywhere — Nick, Mark, and the others — to block the men who threatened to stop him. Only two runners and the goalie were left in his way. One of the men closed in and hunkered down, ready for him. Simon faked a move to the right, then dodged left. The man just had time for an instinctive jerk, which sent the end of his stick spearing into

Simon's chest. Simon toppled forward over himself, hearing the referee's "slow whistle" — a penalty that would wait until a shot was made — as if it came from a distant shore.

Time slowed for Simon, as he experienced his bliss. He never spoke of the sensation to anyone, and never heard others mention it, except to describe a car accident or some other life-threatening moment. His body could think, could work things out for him, could do anything physical he wanted it to do. In moments like this, his two selves came together and he was whole. This was why he made a life of playing this game. Here, on the field, there was a use for it, and it set him apart. Out there in the world — that's where he got confused.

His shoulder hit the ground, but he was ready for it, tucked into a muscled nautilus shape, stick held close to his chest. He rolled with the fall then sprung open, upright, at the ready. He broke into a run. The last opposing runner hurled himself at Simon with his stick across his chest like the bumper of an eighteen-wheeler. Simon knew he wouldn't be left standing if he took the force of it.

Simon angled a shoulder at the runner and kept running. The other man's weight and force worked against him, tipping him over Simon's shoulder to land behind him like a bag of wet laundry.

Clear shot.

His men were taking care of everything behind him; he had a peripheral knowledge of it. *Where's Nick?* There, to his left, he noticed, about fifteen feet away.

Too many thoughts came all at once, overlapping in his mind like a hideous chorus. Bliss drained away in the presence of rationale. What should he do? Take the shot himself? Let one of his team-mates have it?

He hurled the ball to Nick, who, half surprised, half overjoyed, caught it and in the same motion shot it into the net like a rubber bullet. The goalie wasn't expecting the pass, and reacted too slowly.

Simon's team-mates cheered. They jumped up and down and ran together into a hugging, hair-messing, back-slapping throng around Nick.

Simon looked to his coach, who stood with some decorum to one side. Simon raised his eyebrows to the coach, who nodded and mouthed the words "Good show." Simon shrugged and laughed, then jumped on top of his team-mates, sending half of them tumbling to the ground.

As a rehearsed gesture of goodwill, both teams formed lines and shook each other's hands in turn. Simon made sure to give Red an extra vigorous handshake.

~

Simon heard her yelling his name before he saw her. His mother raised her arms in their old "Give me a hug" gesture. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed tight, lifting her off the ground. "Oh, you were great!" she said.

"Hello, Rosalynd," said Fleur, smiling, at Simon's side. She'd never felt right calling this woman "Mom". Besides, she had a mother, a woman who was nothing like *this* person — loud, foul-mouthed, with badly dyed burgundy-black hair piled high on her head, face painted like a beauty contestant going to war.

"Hey there, how are you keeping?" asked Rosalynd.

Fleur wondered what she meant by that. She wasn't "keeping" her son.

"Is your little decorating business taking off yet?" asked Rosalynd.

"It's going really well," said Fleur.

"But you've still got the day job to take care of you, driving the streetcar, right?"

She wanted to scream, but stifled herself. "Yes, I still work for the transit commission, but I'll be able to give that up sometime this year if things keep going the way they are."

"Oh, that's great!" said Rosalynd, genuinely pleased.

Now Fleur was confused. Maybe she was just making it all up, this thing between her and Simon's mom.

"I'm going to go get the car," said Fleur, taking a ring of keys from her pocket, mostly radio-chip tabs, hanging with a few old-fashioned metal keys from her transit job. "Nice to see you, Rosalynd."

When Fleur was out of earshot, Simon smiled and squeezed his mother's shoulder. "Thanks for making an effort there with Fleur. It means a lot to me that you two get along."

"I know. But she doesn't make it easy. Every time I see her, the air fills up with these *nice-cicles*." She made air-quotes around the word. "It's hard to know what to say. I don't think she likes me. She's sweet, but sweet like a Twinkie — you know somehow it's going to wind up being bad for you."

"Naw, she's just — I dunno — this is a difficult time for us."

"It's okay. Don't worry about it. You don't have to make excuses for her. You love her. That's enough for me." She tipped her head and smiled, then touched her son's cheek. "I'm really proud of you," she said, "you turned out okay." Then her independent-single-mother reflexes jumped in and she turned practical on him; he'd seen it a thousand times. "Gotta go," she said. "How about dinner next Sunday. You don't have a game, right?"

"Nope. I'll call you."

"Okay. But I'm out on Thursday night: poker game," she said, and turned to walk to her car. Already somewhere else, she fished through her overstuffed white leather bag for her key as she walked away.

Simon went to face his doom.

Fleur was angry, he already knew. He hoisted his big kit bag full of dirty equipment into the back of Fleur's station wagon. The car was a long, flat, cream-coloured box, shapeless except for a slightly aerodynamic ridge along either side, tapering off where it met the chrome harmonica bumpers. The tabletop roof sat over an expanse of windows. It was the perfect car for the family they planned to have but didn't. Couldn't, it seemed.

Fleur started the engine as soon as she heard Simon slam the back hatch. He opened the passenger side door and sat without looking at her.

They headed out from the downtown core toward the suburb where they lived. Fleur flicked on the windshield wipers, which slicked away the rain but did nothing about the fog inside. Simon sensed that the fog bothered her, so he rolled down his window. He stuck his arm out and leaned into the rain, letting it spray his face.

"Good game," said Fleur, speaking first into the dense air between them, as she usually did in times like this.

"Yeah, it was a good match. They were a good team, but our guys really came together."

"You helped," said Fleur.

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"Maybe you helped too much."

"I play on a team. That's how a good team member plays. I've got to be fair." He stopped, and laughed at a thought. "I'd love it if people thought of me as the Wayne Gretzky of lacrosse."

Fleur, already driving close to the car ahead, dodged around it. Simon clutched his door-armrest. With the other car behind them, Fleur looked at him square-on before looking back to the road. "Okay, two things," she said, counting with fingers on the steering wheel. "One, Gretzky played hockey. *Hockey* — you know, one of those sports that people watch! Two, Gretzky's been retired longer than you've been alive. An old man can't make money at sports. But that's okay because he's rich. Which you, my love, are not. And why is he rich? Because he knew how to be a star when he had the chance."

Simon pulled his arm back from the window and stared at the road ahead. His hair swept back from his face in waves and crests of black curls, still matted down from his helmet. His chin pulled up as his face tightened. He drummed his fingers on his sore knee. If he said anything, he knew it would just make things worse.

"That shot was yours," she said.

He looked at her. Maybe his mother was right, maybe she was just a bitter pill that was making him sick.

Or maybe he was angry because Fleur was right. He knew she'd seen his moment of indecision from the stands.

~

They turned up the laneway and parked facing Simon's little blue sportscar, its front like a silver ramjet and rear like an old bar of soap. Its little round headlamps gave a wink as Fleur turned off the station wagon's lights. The car was Simon's treat to himself last year when his team won the playoffs. Unfortunately, the win didn't end up making him much richer.

Fleur popped the hatch with a button on the dashboard. Simon got out, took his bag from the back, and walked to the house. He leaned the pocket with his house-key in it toward the front door to unlock it, and headed in and down the split stairs to the basement. He heard Fleur go upstairs and walk around the kitchen. She'd start supper, they'd eat, they'd sit around, they'd go to bed.

Is this what I want?

He pushed his damp clothes into the washing machine. *Soap*. He'd forgotten to put in the soap first. He'd get white clumps of soap on his clothes if he put the it in now. He pulled the clothes back out, then grabbed the box of detergent from its spot beside the dryer.

"New Formula!" it claimed. "Works Great on Stains!" He imagined an ad with him in slow-motion, taking a shot on the net as he flew sideways toward the ground, landing in a messy, stain-making swamp of muddy grass — even though he played "box" lacrosse: indoors in arenas, so his uniform never met real grass. His imagination cut to a shot of him pulling his now-clean jersey from the dryer and smelling it.

Except no one uses a lacrosse player to endorse their products, he thought.

He poured a pile of the white stuff into the washer, then rammed his clothes in and cranked the dial to the start position.

It's a good team, he thought. *Maybe it's not much money, but sometimes I can help with the mortgage payments. And if the franchise gets picked up... And I love my wife. Yeah, sometimes she's hard to take, but she just wants the best for us.*

He remembered their trip to Greece, the picture he took of her, sitting next to the chalky white wall of a restaurant that looked over the sea. She had a glass of red wine in her hand and smiled a big vacation smile. She wore big sunglasses and her hair was pulled back because she'd been hot walking around earlier. Her round face shone in the dusk, pale with sunburn spray-painted across her cheeks and nose. That was a good time. So what if things were a little tough now? He loved her, and that was that.

“Right?” he asked whomever he was trying to convince — the other side of his head, perhaps. The side that presented an image of him walking out the front door and out into the night, going nowhere in particular.

He shook the thought from his mind and went upstairs to the kitchen.

Chapter 3

Connie looked around the wood-panelled room one last time. Or, rather, a *fifth* last time. "I don't like the idea of leaving all our things here," she said.

"Well, honey," said Roger — he'd never called her 'honey' when they were engaged, but now they were a married couple — "we have to go out sometime. The travel agency assured us that this was the safest hotel on the coast."

"Okay," she said, biting a nail and looking at her dark green suitcase. She leaned over and snapped the case closed, looked at it, then pulled herself away. "Okay, let's go! And if they steal everything, well, at least we'll still be here in paradise. We can always have the traveller's cheques replaced. And — oh, have you got the videocamera?"

Her husband held up a tiny, burnished silver cube with a blue glass lens on it. She smiled at him and laughed at herself. She knew she was making a big deal of this. It had taken her half an hour just to decide which bathing suit to wear. In the end, she picked the lime green one with the tie-up top and the little rectangle of a skirt for a bottom. Though she felt good about the weight she lost for the wedding and was nicely tanned, she still tied a loose white shirt over her top out of modesty. Roger wouldn't be going in the water, so he wore his belted blue shorts, the only ones he owned, with a lapelled yellow shirt and the fishing hat Connie thought looked silly.

Today was a big day for her, and they both enjoyed her excitement about it. This was, after all, part of their honeymoon plans.

At the door, Connie spun around and ran back to her suitcase. It slid easily as she pulled it across the floral print polyester bedspread and onto the floor. She pushed it under the bed, then joined her husband, taking his hand.

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The rusted jeep bumped off the cracked asphalt road into a gravel parking lot. They'd been driving for a while, and Roger worried that maybe the driver was taking them into the jungle to hack them to pieces with a machete. Connie, unaware of her husband's thoughts, grinned elatedly and squeezed his hand as the sign came into view. Neither of them understood the words on it, but the dolphin cartoon on it told them they'd arrived at the right place.

Dolphins were Connie's hobby, her totem animal, her *thing*. She wore tiny dolphin earrings and a matching silver ring on her right pinky. Birthdays and Christmases were a cinch for her friends and family — another fridge magnet, figurine, or stuffed toy — anything 'dolphin', and they were covered.

And now she was about to swim with a real live dolphin! She ran from the jeep, leaving her husband to pay the driver. The tip he gave the man was more of a bribe to ensure he would come back for them. The moment Roger paid, though, he regretted it: he'd exposed too much cash... Which brought him back to the machete fantasy.

The aquarium attendant sat picking at the last bits of his lunch, a fish he ate from the foil it was cooked in. He flipped through a copy of *Movie Insider* that a tourist left behind. The latest young teen heartthrob graced the cover. The attendant looked at a picture of the star's clean, white, handsome face, absentmindedly running a hand through the few days' worth of dark growth on his own.

"Excuse me," said Connie. The high pitch of her voice added to the start she gave the attendant, who leapt up, projecting his lunch from his lap. "Do you speak English?" she said, her shining pink lips slowly mouthing each word.

"Yes," he replied, brushing off his trouser legs.

"Oh good," she sighed.

"You are here to swim with the dolphin?"

"Yes she is!" Her husband said as he walked up and put his hand on her shoulder.

The attendant told them the various prices. They could feed the dolphin for the lowest price. But they didn't come all this way for just that. They could touch the dolphin, have their picture taken with it, or — the show-stopper — they could swim with the dolphin.

"That's what she's here for. How much for that?" The attendant spoke the price without expression, as if it was obvious that this was the going rate for dolphin time.

The couple looked at each other, aghast. That wasn't the price they'd been quoted. "Honey, I don't have to do this, it's okay," said Connie, though her face betrayed her true feelings.

Her husband briefly contemplated taking her up on the offer, then decided to act the good husband and buy her what she wanted. He pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and counted them out into the attendant's palm.

~

Connie dipped her foot in carefully, but the water proved as inviting as a bath. She turned and waved to her husband, who, watching her through the silver cube, waved back. She looked around. What a perfect day for this, she thought, like something from a calendar: clear blue sky, turquoise water, and, past the chain-link fence that defined the aquarium, palm trees along the shore. The fence extended far out into the water.

The attendant handed her a fish. She dropped it with a shriek, and her hands flapped like manicured pink bats into the air by her head. She laughed, forced herself to pick it up, and took several more steps down the concrete stairs into the water.

A ripple formed in the water ahead of her and parted as the sleek grey body of a dolphin surfaced. Connie's mouth dropped open in awe. Even the attendant couldn't help but be moved by her joy at seeing the creature. To him it was just a fish. He'd certainly seen his share of them before this job, but those were all in fishing nets. They were so rare now, he was surprised there were even any left. This one in the water wasn't from here: just to get one they had to buy it from some American company who said they "made" them.

Connie gingerly held the fish out for the dolphin. It probed the offering with its nose, but pushed it aside with enough force to make Connie drop it in the water.

The attendant checked his watch. *Strange*, he thought, *the dolphin hasn't been fed. Why isn't it hungry?*

Connie turned to wave at her husband, mouthing for the camera as she pointed at the dolphin, "I'm-going-to-swim-with-it-now", though the camera could have recorded her saying it. She breast-stroked out into the water. The dolphin turned and circled around her. She dog-paddled, and stretched out a hand to run it down the creature's smooth, wet side. In response, it turned and bumped her with what she called a dolphin's "nose" — actually the long, round, white underbite of its chin.

"Ooh!" she said, startled by the force of the poke.

The attendant stood up from his chair. Something wasn't right.

Connie swam alongside the dolphin and reached out to hold onto it. She squealed and laughed as they picked up speed. She raised an arm and waved to her husband. The dolphin wiggled loose, disappearing underwater. Connie searched the surface for any sign of it. Suddenly she lifted out of the water, hoisted on the dolphin's nose. She screeched as she vaulted through the air and splashed back into the water.

The attendant picked up the mobile phone next to him and dialled his boss' number.

The dolphin seemed to be laughing, a staccato *ee-ee-ee* sound as it swam close to Connie, letting her pet it. Then it gave her a peck on the cheek, as if it knew how cute that was. Connie wrapped her arms as far as she could around the dolphin to hug it. It swam with her holding on. It tipped underwater, then came right back up to the surface. Connie caught her breath and made excited sounds. The dolphin *ee-ee-ee* laughed. It dipped again, and again they both laughed when they came back up. Then it jumped high with her and took them both under.

And stayed under.

Connie's husband stood and used the camera's zoom lens to search for her.

He saw nothing but water.

The attendant talked anxiously into the phone in machine-gun Spanish, waving his free hand at the water.

After a few minutes, the dolphin broke the surface.

Alone.

It danced on its tail across the water. "*Ee-ee-ee*," it laughed at the men.

"*Ee-ee-ee!*"

~

"I'm sorry, I didn't know the panda would make such a mess," said the little man, "A dolphin, eh? Well, I'll make sure there's nothing left of it." He put the phone back into its cradle. Dressed as he always did at home, in nothing but threadbare briefs and an undershirt that stretched over his little round body, he moved through the cluttered apartment. Its one room was completely dark except for the slash of light that tore through the gap between his heavy curtains. From the bed on the other side of the room, he picked up a pair of trousers and put them on. He grabbed a shirt to wear from the nest of them on the floor.

He pulled a torn blue vinyl suitcase from his closet and emptied a laundry hamper into it. He'd clean the clothes when he got to the hotel in Central America.

He unlocked his gun cabinet, which stood against the wall like a shrine, and selected the best weapon for the job.

And last, but not least, he packed his lucky parka. He wouldn't wear it, but its lining would hide the weapon in his luggage. He considered that lucky.

Chapter 4

Hugh lifted the plug in the kitchen sink, letting the murky dishwater empty. He moved away slightly, distancing himself from the lewd noises the water made as it spun down the drain. He picked up the last glass from the dish rack and dried it with a dishtowel, then put it away in a cupboard.

Ted spooned all the leftover Chinese food into a plastic container and threw out the take-away boxes. Oswald usually cooked, but he'd been in no shape for it tonight. Ted and Hugh managed to get him calmed enough to go to bed only half an hour ago. It took something from one of Oswald's old prescriptions to finally put him down.

"Drinks," said Ted. Hugh took the word as an imperative, and followed him to the sitting room.

The bed and breakfast had been a hotel in a former life, a rather ill-reputed one in its latter days. Now, thanks to Ted's skills as a contractor and Oswald's aesthetic sense, it enjoyed another life, probably its fifth such reincarnation.

Hugh dropped himself familiarly onto an antique couch with shiny burgundy brocade and an ornate wooden backrest. Its fabric was the same as the dramatic floor-to-ceiling curtains, and contrasted with the throw-pillows around the room, the same material again in gold, with little tassels on the corners. Hugh couldn't put a finger on what he didn't like about this room and all the others in the building. They were self-consciously stuffed for effect, like a mix of a *Ripley's Believe It Or Not!* museum, the Vatican vaults, and a prom dress.

He played with a ceramic golden retriever, just one of the thousand knick-knacks that Oswald had positioned at exact angles around the room, gifts sent by former guests. Oswald always cringed when Hugh touched the ornaments, and each time Hugh pretended not to notice. He did it out of habit now, even though Oswald was upstairs in bed.

Ted ignored the crystal decanters on top of the portable mahogany bar, opening its front instead to fetch something more to his tastes.

"Oh no," said Hugh, "not that stuff."

Ted tilted some clear liquid from the unmarked bottle into shot glasses for each of them. "Yup," he said, "if there was ever a day for this, it's today." He handed Hugh one of the glasses and rounded the lion-footed, marble-topped coffee table to take a seat in his worn green leather chair. Ted took a healthy slurp of his drink. Hugh pecked at his, each sip feeling like it made the back of his throat evaporate.

"Do you think he'll be okay?" asked Hugh.

"Yeah. Oswald's tougher than he lets on. He just got a bad scare."

Hugh put his drink down and sat back on the couch. He felt his heart punching the inside of his chest. Panic swept over him. Ted noticed the colour drain from Hugh's face. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know. It's just hitting me. We were so busy taking care of Oswald that I didn't really think about what happened." He put his hands out on the couch's arms as if to steady himself. "That was really close. Whatever blew up that panda almost hit me." He stood and paced around the room. "Listen to me: 'blew up that panda'. What the hell? *Who blows up a panda?* We could have died! And for what? Why would you want to blow up a panda bear? Gambling debts? Because it had an affair with your wife? Because—"

Ted jumped up and put his hand on Hugh's shoulder, guiding him back down to the couch. "Shh. I don't know, either. But you're okay, and Oswald is okay, and I'm okay. Leave the rest to the police. They'll catch whoever did it, we'll hear about it on the news, and it'll all be over. You're fine."

Hugh put his hands on his lap and sighed. "Yeah, I guess."

"We should do like Oswald, just go to bed and forget about it." Hugh nodded. "Do you want me to give you a drive?"

"No, thanks. I'll take the streetcar," said Hugh, then gave Ted a slight smile to prove how okay he was.

Ted smiled in response. "Okay. I'll get you your jacket."

~

Hugh watched the buildings and pedestrians through the streetcar window as he rode home. When he reached his building, he stopped in one of the glass-covered outdoor passageways that linked the apartment cubes together, looking at the chunky city skyline, then up at the moon. It was barely there, just a ring left by a glass of milk.

"I nearly died today," he said aloud, not sure what he was doing — thinking, praying, or just allowing himself a moment of craziness. He ran a hand roughly through his hair, something habitual he did to scratch himself, to relieve stress, and just to do something when he had no idea what to do next. He would only let himself do it at the end of the day when it was okay to look dishevelled. He dragged his hand down his face, stretching his droopy cheeks and long apple of a chin.

Sleep? Probably not for a while.

Forget about this? Probably never.

He didn't particularly care about the panda. Something else bothered him: just this morning, he'd contemplated handing his Sundays over to someone else. And now he'd come within a few feet of losing all his Sundays.

~

Hugh ordered a medium coffee. Jenny asked for the same. While the counter attendant poured the drinks, Hugh tried to joke with her, but she apparently wasn't interested in 'cute' customers. She blankly handed the coffees to them. They paid and walked to the side station, where they made all the necessary changes, pouring coffee out, adding milkless milk and non-carcinogenic sweetener. They took the final product to a small corner table and sat down.

Jenny took off her rusty-orange overcoat and cream beret and draped them over the back of her chair. "I thought I wasn't going to have to wear this coat anymore. Guess I was wrong," she said, pointing at the grey day outside, one of the last hold-outs against spring. Cars and buses passed outside the coffeeshop, their hard shells indifferent to the freezing rain. The shop occupied the bottom corner of a downtown skyscraper; the law office where they both worked was high above.

"How was your weekend?" Hugh asked. This was always a good starting point. A shiny, sharp-edged bob of dark hair framed Jenny's pale face. She did 'vixen' very well, and Hugh knew she got a lot of mileage out of that in her spare time.

"It was fun," she said, giving a doe-eyed virgin-whore look across the table.

"Do I get details?"

"No, I don't want to make you jealous — all the clubs I went to, all the men I met." It was just a joke now. In the early days when he was the new piece of office meat, she made her overtures, but he missed them. Or something. Now they were friends. He'd become the sounding board for her rants about pig-men and the injustices of their workplace.

Stepping over the topic of her likely fun- and sex-filled weekend, which would just depress him, he asked, "What time did you leave work on Friday?"

"Ugh. Not until nine." She squeezed her forehead with her hand to squish out the stress there. "I'm really done-for this time," she moaned. Hugh didn't want to get

drawn into her latest office drama, particularly not before his work day had officially started, but she continued without his prompting. "Mister Redding asked me to send a document for him at the end of day, a brief. Forty-six pages — how can they call that a brief? Of course, the machine on the other end wasn't on or something was set up wrong, 'cause it wouldn't go through."

"So how did you get it there?"

"I didn't," she said, fishing it out of her bag and plopping it on the table. "He's going to fire me for sure. He said it was important, but there was no way I could get it through. I even thought of dropping it off, but he said that it was confidential."

"So why did you take it out of the building?"

She hesitated to tell him. "I tried to find a print shop, but they were all closed, and I locked myself out." She sighed. "I know, I know. At least three times a day he tells me how stupid I am. He assumes we're all incompetent 'cause we're not just like him. Working with that is like sitting on a stupid-magnet, and now I'm magnetic, too: stupid things just come hurtling my way and stick. Like this," she said, pointing at the papers on the table.

Hugh felt bad for her, yet struggled with the idea that maybe Redding was right. But then, he recalled out loud, "He says the same thing to me, only it's about not being able to think for myself. Last week he said to me, 'You're the best researcher I've ever had, but, God, you're indecisive. That's why you won't go anywhere.' He actually said that to me. So now I know why in two years he's never given me a promotion."

"At least he thinks you're useful," she lamented, "He'd be so stuck without you there in court, always bailing him out when he's short on facts."

"Hardly comforting to be considered 'the useful idiot' instead of just 'the idiot'." Hugh pulled off a piece of muffin and put it in his mouth. Chewing, he spoke from one corner of his mouth, "I don't want to do this."

"What?" asked Jenny.

"Start the day off bitching about work. It makes me feel crappy." He sipped his coffee. "Why do I always end up hating the people I work for?"

"Cause they're jerks?"

"All of them? I dunno. Maybe I'm looking for something they don't have. So it's hardly fair to blame them, right? I mean, I'm free to go at any time."

Jenny sat back and gave him a sideways look. "What's got you waxing so philosophical at eight-thirty on a Monday morning?" she asked.

"Hm. Didn't realise I was." He didn't want to be melodramatic, but he had to tell someone, because he'd be replaying the event in his mind all day. "Did you see anything on the news about the incident at the zoo?"

"You mean the thing with the panda?"

"Yeah." He paused for emphasis. "I was there." Another pause. "I nearly got hit by whatever killed it."

Jenny sat up. "Really?"

"Yeah. I wasn't hit — clearly this was an open-and-shut case of pandicide — but I could have been. So I find myself asking just what I'm doing coming to this job this morning."

"Wow. But you're okay, right? You didn't get hurt?"

"Oh yeah, I'm fine."

"Wow." She looked at him as if something was suddenly different about him, like he'd come to her this morning from The Land Where Things Happen. "Wow. I have no idea what to say. I'm just glad you're alright." They sat quietly for a moment. Then, still thinking, she stood and pointed to the bathroom to excuse herself, mouthing "Wow" as she left him.

While she was gone, Hugh opened the document on the table. More boring legal stuff, something between Redding and some real estate developer named Meyerhold. He leafed through the pages, skimming through the text wherever it looked less boring. Something about an Olympic stadium. An agreed-upon sum of twenty-five million dollars.

"Nice," said Hugh aloud.

~

"Jenny?" asked Hugh. He'd come by to take a break with her, but found her here in her cubicle, crying. A cardboard box sat on her desk.

"Hugh, he fired me."

"Oh no," he said, though he wasn't completely surprised. Seeing that she needed to talk about it, he sat on the edge of her desk.

"It's because of that brief. But what else could I have done? It was after hours. Redding came in on the weekend and freaked when he couldn't find the papers. When I showed them to him just now, he grabbed them from me and fired me on the spot." She started to sob. "And then he dropped them in the shredder. They didn't even matter."

"Evil bastard," Hugh seethed. "I'm gonna go talk to him."

She rolled her wet eyes at him.

"Yeah, I guess he won't listen to me. Aww, Jenny, this isn't fair. There's nothing else you could have done. God, I just hate him. I want to quit."

His mind replayed what he'd just said: "I want to quit." He really did. He'd wanted to for a long time. Somehow his panda baptism had given him a new sense of freedom, of power: confronted with his own mortality for real, not just by the tedium of laundry, he couldn't make sense of working unhappily just to create an illusion of security. Why not do what he wanted?

He turned to Jenny and wiped a tear from her face with his thumb. With resolve in his voice, he said to her, "Life is short. Too short for this garbage. Too short to be helping people like him." He stood up. "I'm going to his office right now to tell him off."

"Don't Hugh. You getting fired won't help me." She sighed, pained to pass on secretarial information, "Besides, he just left. He's in court with the real estate developer until this afternoon."

"Meyerhold?"

"No, Arcturos. The Olympic stadium thing."

"Huh? I thought Meyerhold... Wait. Arcturos is our client?" asked Hugh, confused. Then something clicked.

~

Redding wore an immaculately-tailored suit, buttoned high, every seam a perfectly defined angle. His hair was groomed back, smooth, and his skin sported a fresh tan. His eyes were a baby blue that would be rivetingly handsome, except that they were set just a little too far apart. It gave him a fish-like, unnerving appearance "Oh, good," he said as Hugh arrived in the courtroom. "I'm glad you're here. I can use you this morning."

And it's the last time you get to use me, too, thought Hugh, rolling down the sleeves of his white shirt, then tightening his narrow tie.

"Hugh, I'd like you to meet our client, Victor Arcturos. Victor, this is Hugh Willard, my research genius."

"Mr. Arcturos," said Hugh with a big smile, shaking the hand of the little brick wall in a suit. He reminded him of a Greek version of Ted. But Ted exuded a dry kindness, while this man seemed surly. *He's a box of dynamite*, Hugh thought, *and I've got a box of matches in my head*. Could he really do to Redding what he had in mind? *Yup*, he thought, smiling to himself as the judge entered the courtroom and they all sat down.

Hugh listened as the tale unfolded: Arcturos had a contract to convert a harbourfront facility into a site for the Olympics in two years. He'd won that tender, helped the city develop its plans, and even started doing some of the initial work. Then the city broke the contract, deciding to look for another developer.

Redding represented Arcturos' suit for the lost work, lost revenue, and damages.

A year before, they'd won a similar case for a client. Redding would call on him to cite the outcome of that case. They both knew he could do it; it was all still in his head. As the moment approached, Hugh's revulsion grew. When Redding turned and asked him to present his information, his heart ran like a gerbil on a wheel.

"This is for Jenny," he said to Redding, smiling, as he stood up. Redding's tan seemed to go pale.

Hugh began. "I've been asked to present the findings from another case to establish a precedent that supports our client's claim." He looked to Redding, who nodded for him to go on, but the nod was slow, unsure. Hugh smiled, his little mouth stretching wide and nearly lipless.

"However, the wording of the judge's decision in that case was very specific to that particular situation. In this case, it clearly doesn't apply. Mister Redding knows that. Basing our claim on that ruling clearly dooms our case to failure." The judge looked at Hugh, puzzled, then looked to Redding for explanation. Redding grabbed for Hugh's arm, but Hugh had already moved away, approaching the judge's bench.

"So why would we want to lose a case? Unless, of course, we stood to make a *profit* from that loss. What if one of our lawyers, say, oh, I dunno, Lawrence Redding, had convinced a certain city councillor," he said, indicating a shocked-looking man at their opponent's desk, "that the city should fire Arcturos and find another developer, then offered, for a fee, to help them find one? And what if that lawyer had also been offered something like, oh, twenty-five million dollars by another developer to help create a winning proposal to the city? Let's use a hypothetical name here like, um, 'Meyerhold'. So Meyerhold gives Redding cash to help them present the perfect proposal, with all the new features that Arcturos helped develop, features that only those working with Arcturos would know."

Hugh turned to Victor Arcturos. "Now wouldn't that be a lousy thing to do?" Redding, speechless, looked to Hugh, then to Victor, whose nostrils flared. Victor stood, and, as the judge banged her gavel and called for order, smacked his brick of a fist into Redding's nose.

Redding fell out of his chair onto the floor. The last Hugh saw of Redding as he strode from the courtroom was his upturned shiny brown leather shoes.

Guess I can make a decision after all, he thought as he walked out of the building. He was cold outside in just shirtsleeves, and his skin instantly turned to tight gooseflesh. But he felt very much alive, and he liked that feeling.

~

Hugh sat in the tiny staff bathroom in the basement with a newspaper open in front of him. The floor and walls were rough cement, painted over to make them impermeable to the various stains and puddles here. One lightbulb hung over his head, so he had to

angle the newspaper to read it. The old wooden door had been painted white a number of times, but was filthy and peeling now. Above the doorknob was a latch, the third or fourth there'd been, judging from the screwholes. The newest latch didn't reach its slot, so Hugh had to press his foot against the door, partly for privacy, partly so he wouldn't get clobbered if the door swung in.

Someone knocked. "Are you coming out of there any time soon?" asked Doug, one of the other waiters.

"Do I have to?"

"Well, you're really only allowed a half hour break per shift."

"Okay, I'll be out in a minute," said Hugh, defeated. He flipped through the classifieds section. Most of the want ads were thinly-veiled scams, like "Work from home, make thousands of dollars a day, small initial investment". Hugh pictured a little immigrant woman printing money in her basement, really believing that the mint needed people to do its overflow work. Then there were the other ads that read like "Entry-level position, minimum wage. Previous aerospace engineering experience an asset."

Now he was depressed. He had to get back to work. He'd only been a waiter for a week, and already he hated it.

~

"Okay," said Carrie, who'd been covering for him, "Table Five ordered another round of drinks, same as before. Table Nine paid and left — your tip is at the bar — and I sat some new people. They've got menus now but they haven't ordered anything yet. The other five tables' food came up, and I delivered it."

"Thanks a lot," said Hugh. "I can cover for you when your break comes up."

"Yeah, right, sure," she said, heading back to her section.

For the next few hours of the evening, he shuttled back and forth between his tables, the kitchen, and the bar. The patrons were impressed by the way he remembered their orders, and one large group even changed seats to try to fool him. Hugh smiled and joked with them, but inwardly thought they were all drunken slobs. Of course he remembered their orders. If they came back a year later he could tell them each what they'd had. He was glad now that he hadn't feigned interest enough to learn their names.

His problem with waiting tables wasn't remembering, it was prioritising. He had no idea how to decide what to do first. He felt his doubt deep down, like a kind of appendicitis, and it hurt even more that it so closely resembled Redding's criticism of him.

When the crowd thinned down, Hugh approached Carrie. "I'm kinda burnt out. Do you think you could cover for me for a few minutes?"

"Sure thing, Weeder."

"What?"

"Weeder. You know, like, 'in the weeds'? Like, where you spend your shifts."

"No, I've never heard the expression. But I bet it's a big waiter compliment, isn't it?"

"Oh yeah," she said, laughing, "the biggest." They smiled at each other, both relieved that they'd acknowledged his ineptitude. "Go on, take a break. Where's your order pad?"

"Oh. I haven't been using it. It's all up here," he said, tapping his head, "I just punch it in when they want their bill."

"Could you not do that?" she said, souring.

"Right, sorry," he said, feeling burnt because she was right. Fine, he figured, she was a career waiter, with her bleached blonde hair and plunging top — a look that subtly suggested the old lie that if you tipped her enough, maybe, just maybe...

Hugh grabbed his newspaper and descended the stairs to the basement. It was a concrete crypt with a foul, musty smell. He sat on the last step and opened the paper. From the corner of his eye, he saw something beside him on the wooden slat: a flattened, dried-out mouse. That accounted for the smell down here. He picked up the mouse husk and threw it behind the stubby silver beer kegs piled up like depth charges in the belly of a warship.

His eye fell on the ad right away: "Research assistant needed for field work. Must travel. Good cause, lousy pay." With a big smile, he stared down the particulars of the ad, threw away the paper, and ran back upstairs.

~

"Hi, Hugh," she said, standing up to shake his hand, "I'm Nadine." Her woven cotton dress was dozens of years out of style, and her hair was pulled back in a purely functional pony tail. Her eyes were framed by tiny silver wire-rimmed glasses that looked like she'd fixed them a couple of times herself.

"Hi, nice to meet you," he said. She picked up a pile of papers from the chair and added them to the skyline of documents on her desk, then gestured for him to have a seat. He smiled, though he was dismayed about the smell of natural gas in her little flat.

"Sorry about the mess," she said, sitting. From the pile to her right, she picked up a sheet that Hugh recognised as his CV. "I'm really happy with your credentials, Hugh." She read: "Pre-med and law degrees. Wow." She shook her head. "Of course, I can't compete with the kind of pay you're used to."

You might be surprised, he thought, but didn't say it out loud, figuring it was bad form to trash his previous employers in a job interview. He also didn't draw attention to the fact that while he held those degrees, he'd never actually become either a doctor or a lawyer.

"But it's interesting work we do," she continued, "and I think our cause is pretty important, too."

"So what do you do?"

She sat back. "We're watchdogs." She looked around her. "I mean, *I*. I know this place looks pretty bad. But I've just received some private funding, so you don't have to worry about getting paid."

"Watchdogs. Who do you watch?"

"It's not so much a 'who' as a 'what'. We're — I'm — watching for violators of the Asilomar 2 Treaty, the agreement "

"Not to engage in recombinant DNA research and testing."

"So you know about it?" she asked, pleased.

"Well, just what I've read in the news."

"Do you know about the Human Genome Project?"

"I remember hearing about it when I was little, when they finished it. People compared it to landing on the moon. But I didn't really get what it was."

"Our group was involved in a television documentary a year ago about all of this."

"I didn't see that."

"No," said Nadine, regretfully, "no one did. It was supposed to be one of those hardball investigations. We were going to square off against this company we were sure was violating the treaty. But we couldn't get anything to stick to them. They had

a perfect defence for every piece of evidence we had linking them to secret genetic tests." She stood up, "I've got a recording, though, of what would have gone to air." She rummaged through a box on the floor behind her.

"Does your group have a name?" Hugh asked.

"You know," she said, speaking over her shoulder as she searched, "we never decided on one. We were going to call ourselves 'Genepeace'..." Hugh groaned. "Yeah, exactly. And that was the best name we came up with. So we gave up. It wasn't our top priority."

She held up a gold poker chip. "Here it is." She gestured for him to follow her over to the couch. She put some boxes on the floor to make room for them, and slipped the chip into the black machine on top of her big, dusty television. "There's no sound. We didn't get that far into production."

The screen lit up with stock footage of a conveyor belt of pills, then those pills being counted into bottles. "Uh," said Nadine, hunkered on the floor by the TV, "this part was to establish the background of the issue. Blah, blah, blah, advances in health-care. Pharmaceutical companies were the driving force behind genetic research..." She pointed at the screen, which showed a white building like a seashell with bicycle spokes sticking out of it. "That's Indigenics' head office, in Montreal. They started up about thirty-five years ago."

The image changed, showing the double-helix shape of DNA strands, like twisting party streamers joined by beaded strings. "The Human Genome Project was going well around the turn of the century," she continued. "and by 1999 the first chromosome had been mapped — Chromosome 22. Soon after, there was a map of the whole human genome."

"All of the instructions for making a human being," added Hugh.

"Well," said Nadine, squinting, "not exactly, but that's more or less the idea. Oh, here," she pointed again, but the screen just showed a water pitcher. "That's what distinguished Indigenics from all the others."

"A jug of water?"

"No. It's a DNA computer. It's what allowed them to speed up the gene mapping process. It could make calculations a trillion times faster than any other computer of the day." The camera panned along a chart about a city block long, filled with an intricate array of purple smears.

"What's that?" Hugh asked, "The Shroud of Turin?"

"No, better. It's the complete genetic ingredients of a human being. Or at least that's what they thought it was."

"So that's the recipe for a person."

"No, that's exactly it: now they had all the *ingredients*, but they didn't have the *recipe*. There was a big shock wave that followed the project, when it became clear that nobody knew what to do with this information. They'd identified the genes, but genes make proteins, and nobody understood yet how those interacted. To follow your analogy, there wasn't a cook alive who was sophisticated enough to make this dish. It was just way too complicated. And every attempt they made was a travesty."

The picture changed to an image of a young man, smiling and healthy. "They kept trying to stick genes into people who had hereditary diseases but as often as not the result was disastrous. This young man was perfectly healthy, in stable condition with a manageable liver disease, until this gene therapy test." The scene cut to the same young man with a tube in his mouth, unconscious. "Days later, he was dead. Massive, cascading organ failure."

The image changed again, showing sheep, then cows, then race horses. "Of course, Indigenics moved into the territory of cloning, which was the natural extension of this work — making exact copies of creatures with desirable traits."

"Wait," said Hugh, "those two sheep there. One's white and one's black."

"This is where Indigenics leapt ahead. Sponsors pulled their funding out of other companies when they couldn't produce results. But Indigenics' DNA computer could make billions of guesses to fill in the blanks about which genes created which features in an animal."

"So they could change whichever parts they wanted to."

"When it worked. So not only could Indigenics create genetically identical copies of an animal, they could also change them as they pleased to create new characteristics." Images of a field full of dead corn, then a stock ticker rolled across the television. "For every triumph in the field, though, there were at least four horror stories. It was a public relations nightmare. Then there was a scandal when some papers were leaked that suggested that Indigenics was trying to create viable human embryos — foetuses, not just stem cells. There were allegations made, but of course nothing could be proven."

The footage showed a man in a long overcoat in front of the giant shell-and-spokes building. "Who's he?" asked Hugh.

"Doctor Rudiger. Head of Indigenics, and a bioterrorist as far as I'm concerned." The figure took a draw on an asthma inhaler. "Look at that: he participated in one of his own experiments. The DNA computer worked out a cure for a condition he had, and to prove his faith in his work he volunteered to be a test subject. The treatment cured his disease, but it also left him with a brand new condition. Now he's stuck having to use that thing for the rest of his life. His body's lost the ability to synthesise a particular set of enzymes."

"That's a bit embarrassing, eh?"

"No, that's the worst thing about these people. They feel so justified that they just keep plowing ahead, no matter how many indicators there are that it's a really bad idea." She turned the video player off. "But after a couple of medical disasters, some deaths linked to modified foods, and the big GM corn blight, there was a movement to reintroduce the Asilomar Treaty of 1975."

"1975?"

"Yeah. An agreement was made then not to engage in tests that involved altering genes in living creatures."

"Which no one paid attention to."

"Right. But when the treaty was enacted the second time, people were afraid enough to make it stick."

Remembering himself, Hugh checked his watch. "Oh, I'm sorry, I've got to get going to the restau— to my job."

"You should give them your notice, Hugh."

"You're offering me the job?"

"I have a good feeling about you. And judging from your work history you're certainly bright enough to do the research. So the position's yours if you want it."

"What exactly would I be doing?"

"Working for Indigenics."

"What?"

"They're doing something in Costa Rica. That's outside Asilomar's jurisdiction. I need to find out what they're up to, because I don't trust them to stay out of their old line of work indefinitely."

"That's the travel that your ad mentioned."

"Uh-huh. So you need to get your passport in order. I've been working with a corporate head-hunter who's going to place you in a position with their operations down there."

"When do I leave?"

“Four days,” she said. “And I’ll be joining you in a week.”
Hugh stared at her.

~

The cab coursed through town. Hugh tried to ignore the “news” projected on the divider between him and the cabby. The news segments were thin placeholders for the advertisements in-between. Instead of watching, he looked out the window at the suited men and women who moved like fashionable insects between the glass and steel monoliths. He always enjoyed being free on a work day.

But he had a lot to do, and only two more days before he had to leave for Costa Rica. It was against his nature to take a cab — it would cost him at least twenty-five dollars just to get uptown — but time before the trip was running out, and he needed to get his identification in order.

“Today on ScienceFront,” said the news announcer. In spite of himself, Hugh looked up to see a projection of a slim woman with a severe hairdo and suit, her face made up in an unnaturally pale colour, her lips bright like a fresh wound. A scratch on the divider gave her a scar that moved about as she spoke. She wore the driver’s permit on her chest.

The picture changed to show a water jug with several wires dangling in it. Hung over its front were a round red lens and a small blue rectangular lens. Together, they looked like a strange pair of sunglasses on the jug. The announcer’s voice spoke over the image, “The DNA supercomputer. Whatever became of this technology?”

The announcer walked through a hall filled with various beige and candy-coloured boxes on pedestals, computers of varying ages. “In the aftermath of such technological mishaps as Y2K and the Great Sarasota Erasure, reliance on computers has been on the decline. As alternative methods of reasoning, calculation, and storage have emerged, what’s become of supercomputing projects such as the DNA computer?”

Now the announcer stood in a laboratory beside the jug. “This once-mighty combination of biology and computing was specifically designed to map out human genetic code. As we all know, the alteration of the human genome is illegal in most developed countries. So what does this little fellow — whose operating life span has been estimated at one hundred and twenty years — do with its spare time?” She gave a rehearsed laugh, then held up a sheet of paper covered in little black and white checks. “That’s right: crosswords! And it’s pretty good, too. It can solve every daily crossword published in the world within an eighth of a second — in its original language! Not bad, even by today’s standards.”

The camera zoomed in on her face, making Hugh jump back in the taxi seat. “For ScienceFront, this is Cindy Lemure”. Then an advertisement played, telling him about a remarkable new breakthrough in the treatment of diarrhoea. He turned his head and tried very hard to find something outside to pay attention to.

~

A man passed in front of Hugh with a floor polisher. Hugh tapped his pen against his thumb, then tucked it into the pocket of his sportscoat. He leaned back on the bench, enjoying the squish of its black vinyl padding under his arms. It was long enough for him to lie down on, but he assumed that someone here would have a problem with that.

He’d paid a higher price for “same day” service, which the clerk told him usually meant an hour. After spending fifty-five minutes in this government building, with

its grey marble floors and shiny black marble walls, strange globs of commissioned artwork, and self-congratulatory brass plaques and busts, he had a new appreciation for the relative nature of time.

This is insane, he thought. He couldn't believe he'd taken Nadine up on her offer. In days, he'd be in a completely different country. Why did he accept the job?

He sat upright on the bench. Maybe he should phone her, tell her that he'd changed his mind. He'd get his birth certificate, take it home, put it in a box, and use it as ID when he applied for a mortgage or something. Going to Costa Rica was a stupid idea, ludicrous. He was going to work for a company while gathering intelligence on them. Hugh Willard didn't do things like that. Hugh Willard took jobs that were below his ability, that he could do in his sleep, that had nice salaries and indefinite contracts.

But, he thought, *Hugh Willard just quit a job like that. And Hugh Willard escaped a potentially life-threatening attack that killed the world's only panda-bear*. His definition of "Hugh Willard" had become a little shaky. Why *couldn't* he do this? Sure it was risky, but he'd almost been killed here at home.

What the hell, he thought, *I'm going*. Decisions were getting easier lately.

Through the glass door he saw his clerk return to the counter, and went back into the office.

"Here you go, Mister Willard," she said.

"Great," said Hugh, looking at the form she gave him, a long piece of heavy paper. It was his 'long form birth certificate', a printout of the document filled out by his mother and his—

"Excuse me," he said, stopping the clerk from walking away.

"Yes?"

"Where's my father's signature? The line where my father's supposed to sign — it's blank."

"Hmm," she said, craning her head to look at the paper Hugh held out for her. "I'm not sure what to say, sir. This is an exact duplicate of the form that was filled out on the day you were born. Are you sure your father was there that day?"

"Ha! You don't know my dad; he would've been there. Look, I need this today to get a travel visa. With this mistake, I may not be able to—"

"It's not a mistake, sir. This is the document that was filed. But that was thirty years ago. I can't tell you why your father's name isn't on it."

Hugh sighed. "Okay. I guess this will have to do. Thanks for your help."

As he left the office, he stared at the form, perplexed. He'd have to call his mom about this later.

~

Hugh paced, waiting for the call to board his flight. He'd phoned his mother to say goodbye, but since there had been no problems with the working visa he forgot to mention the birth certificate.

He looked at the boarding pass shaking in his hands. This feeling wasn't so different from the one a few weeks ago, after the panda incident. He was confused: he had no fear of flying. What was this feeling? It wasn't a fear, it was more of a shock, a nervous exhilaration, a—

A feeling of losing himself. At the zoo, he'd nearly lost his life. And now, in a sense, he really was losing his life. He'd left his job. He'd abandoned his apartment and all his things in it, figuring he'd send rent cheques — he hadn't really worked that part out. The bonsai in his living room would probably die before he got back.

Back! He was on his way to Costa Rica! He'd never been anywhere outside North America. What he was experiencing, he realised, was the rapid demise of the person he knew himself to be.

Hugh smiled a big, lopsided grin to himself as the airline attendant called for his flight to board. He walked down the gangway, stepping of the margins of his life, off to Costa Rica, off to—

Spy on a giant biotechnology company.

A drawstring in his brain pulled his smile into a pucker. His hands splayed like starfish on either side of the plane's door. He looked back up the gangway, but it was too late. The steward folded Hugh's arms and pulled him into the plane, then took his ticket-stub. A stewardess guided him by the shoulders to his seat.

Chapter 5

The bus slowed to a stop, and the class' teacher, Mr. Lygate, stood up to take control. His missionary experience taught him that local children needed someone to guide them at every turn, or they would revert to wildness. He felt dizzy, but refused to let himself waver or fall down, despite the heat in the bus. He could never get accustomed to Central American weather. Fifteen children sat in the old bus, most of whom had burnt off their hyperactive energy during the three-hour trip and now slept.

Mr. Lygate left the bus and fanned himself with his canvas hat. He leaned on the front of the vehicle, which was flat with a seemingly out of place Mercedes logo in the middle of the grille. The bus had evidently been painted by brush with matte house-paint — all white with a red stripe up one side, around the front, and down the other side. The place name "Orosi" was permanently hand-lettered in red paint in the destination spot above the front windshield. But that was where they'd come from, not the destination they'd just reached.

Feeling more stable, Mr. Lygate got back on the bus and clapped his hands sharply three times. "All right, children, we're here. Wake up, look alert!" One little girl began speaking to him in Spanish, but he stopped her with an upturned hand. "In English," he scolded.

"Where are we?" she asked carefully.

"We are at an experimental farm. It's an example of modern farming techniques, much more efficient than your local methods." He said 'local' the way some locals said 'missionary'. He directed the children out of their seats with his hands as if they were a choir. "Up, up. Come along. Let's go."

~

They walked up the dusty path from the road, toward the farm. The children followed him in pairs, holding hands. Mr. Lygate felt particularly trusting of this group, who were also ten years old, so he spared them the indignity of wearing the telephone cord wrist bands. They knew, however, that they must always be able to reach their buddy's hand at a moment's notice.

A man met them at the wooden gate of the farm and shook hands with Mr. Lygate. He was dressed like a cowboy, complete with leather vest and kerchief, hat and boots. He gestured for everyone to follow him as he swung the gate open.

He led the group through the facility's three greenhouses, which teemed with leafy green life. The children were familiar with rainforest, so the only unusual feature for them was the glass dome overhead. The lecture on hydroponics and zero-impact agriculture was lost on them, but from time to time they spotted a butterfly, which they followed about with pointed fingers. A bee dive-bombed the children during the tour, inspecting their brightly-coloured clothing. Mr. Lygate's intense interest in the guide's commentary was broken by the squealing and darting about as the children tried to avoid the insect. He was pleased, though, to see that they ran hand in hand.

"Children! Settle down. The bee is not interested in harming you. Like most creatures found around a farm, it is completely benign. Do you know what 'benign' means?"

One of them put up a hand.

"Yes, Manny?"

"One after Bee Eight?" The other children laughed, and Manny was pleased with himself, until he saw the look of consternation on Mr. Lygate's face. Lygate would brook no jokes at the expense of the language he worked so hard to teach

them, and disliked even more the challenge to his authority. Manny's smile melted away, and the other children quickly pretended innocence.

"No, Manny. Benign means 'kindly', 'gentle', or 'propitious'." He turned back to their guide, happy to leave them with another word to ponder. When he finished with them, they would be fit to have dinner with the queen, as his mother used to say. Unfortunately, both his mother and the queen had been dead for some time.

They went out to the fields behind the greenhouses to see the livestock. The farmhand led them past paddocks of cows, bulls, and llamas. Some of the children had never seen a llama, and stopped to pet the animals' long necks as they leaned out, expecting food.

"Gather 'round," said their farmhand guide, making a gesture with his hand. The children quickly took to his friendly manner, and obeyed him immediately, circling about him. "Next we will go see the horses and donkeys," said the guide, "and if your teacher says it's okay, you can even have a ride on the donkeys." The children hopped with excitement. The guide smiled, as did Mr. Lygate. It was innocent enough, and a good learning experience, so the teacher would allow it.

"But now you must promise to obey one rule. Do you see that corral on the far side of this field?" The children nodded. "Good. The animals in that area do not belong to us. They belong to another company that is raising them. You must promise not to go near the corral or touch them if you see them. If you can't do this, then I can't show you the horses and donkeys. Do you promise?" He looked at each of the children for an answer. They all nodded excitedly. Mr. Lygate had drilled into them the dread of broken promises and other sins, so when the guide looked to him for assurance, Mr. Lygate nodded his head; their word was as good as his.

The children laughed and squealed during their rides, hoisted up to sit on the donkeys' backs. Some of them sat passively, while others tried out cowboy moves. In either case, the animals stood still until the farm hand led the frontmost animal around the path worn in the grass.

Tired in the heat, Mr. Lygate retired to lean on the shoulder-high wooden fence at the far side of the corral. He rested his elbows on the slats of the fence and stared up at the sky. His head lolled forward and his eyes closed. He jerked it back up and opened his eyes. A moment later, his eyelids lowered again and his head tipped backwards.

One of the children shrieked, and Mr. Lygate's eyes flashed open. He looked around frantically for the children, his heart racing, but soon located the source of the sound: Maria. She squealed when excited; the ride must have been getting her worked up.

Mr. Lygate felt that something was amiss. He reached up to his head and felt the thin hair there. *My hat*. He looked around the ground at his feet, but it wasn't there. He turned to face the spot where he'd been leaning.

The fence. His hat had fallen over it. He stood on his tiptoes and looked down the other side of the fence. Sure enough, there it was, folded on itself in the grass like a burrito — or whatever they were called.

He looked back to the children. They were completely engaged in the donkey rides. He felt a pang of jealousy about their fondness for the farmhand, but he didn't let himself succumb to the emotion. It was good that they were being so well-behaved for this complete stranger in cowboy clothes.

The rides had gone on long enough. He would quickly climb over the fence, get his hat, and climb back. Besides, the children made the promise not to go into the corral, not him. He was a grown-up, and had the authority to make such decisions.

He climbed over the fence — he hadn't done that in a long time — and stooped to get his hat. He crouched down and looked around. *What's in here, anyway?*

he wondered. The corral seemed to be an empty patch of dry grass, except for the little grove of trees to his right.

Something moved in the trees. Mr. Lygate stood up quickly, ready to climb back over the fence.

A sheep.

Mr. Lygate laughed to himself. The sheep approached him, just a regular dirty white sheep. The farm hand must have been making some kind of joke when he gave his warning. *Strange sense of humour*, thought Mr. Lygate. *I don't understand these people.*

More sheep came from the shade of the trees, including a ram with thick, curled horns made of a material like toenails. The first sheep nuzzled him. Mr. Lygate wasn't sure if sheep liked to be patted, but he tried anyway, scratching it about the ears. Its thick wool felt greasy to the touch, so he pulled his hand away and wiped it on his trouser-leg.

The sheep were all around him now. The first one nibbled at the buttons on his shirt-cuffs, while another started on his laces.

"Hey," he said, pushing away the button-sheep, laughing, though annoyed. He pulled his arm free and found that the buttons were gone. He pushed the lace-sheep back with his foot, but his boot came off.

"Ow!" he said, pulling his other arm away from the sheep, up into the air. He looked at his hand to find that his pinky finger had a deep gash in it from a sheep's blunt teeth. They nipped at him with their big hard teeth, and it hurt.

Less careful now, Lygate pushed the animals away with all his strength. One wouldn't let go of its hold on his thigh. Blood soaked through his trousers. He lost his temper and punched the sheep in the head. The sheep was unhurt — its head felt like a rock — but it backed away in surprise.

...Which gave him a clear view of the ram. It stared at him with one big yellowy-brown eye set in the side of its head. Then it turned its head and lowered its horns. *It's going to charge.* Mr. Lygate scrambled to get to the fence. But he wasn't fast enough. The ram caught him in the square of the back, crushing him against the wood.

Manny looked over to see Mr. Lygate raise his head and hands over the forbidden fence like a puppet doing "The Mexican Wave". The child laughed, thinking that Mr. Lygate was being uncharacteristically funny. Manny expected him to mime "Going Down Stairs", but when Mr. Lygate's arms flailed up again he screamed in fear and pain. Manny called to the others as Mr. Lygate slid out of sight.

Chapter 6

The plane was descending: Hugh felt the pressure change in his ears. In the time it took to fly here, he'd run through the gamut of emotions, from fear to excitement to his present state of impatience. He felt grimy in his clothes and the air smelled stale. His leg muscles felt like they were atrophying from the way he'd had to tuck them under the seat in front of him for so long. His stomach rumbled with hunger. On his flight from Toronto to his connection in Miami he was presented with chicken something — like knuckles in teriyaki sauce. Preparing to eat the meal, he juggled pieces of packaging, then tried to get at the food while folding lids and baggies and cups into each other so everything would fit on the magazine-sized seat-back tray. To use his cutlery without elbowing the woman beside him (who, thankfully, directed all her conversation at her husband in the aisle seat), he had to fold his arms up like a praying mantis.

He played with his seat belt as they landed then taxied up to the terminal. He watched the other passengers unbuckle their seat belts and spring up to grab their bags only to wait, cramped in the tiny aisle, until they were allowed leave the plane. When they were all gone, Hugh leisurely retrieved his bag and walked down the empty aisle, where the flight crew picked objects from the seats like seagulls on a landfill.

The stewardess at the door smiled to him and said, "Goodbye. *Adios.*" Hugh smiled back and walked into the airport, but mentally kicked himself for not using the time on the plane to learn Spanish.

~

Ed spotted him first. Someone in HR at the head office gave him a brief description of the person they were supposed to fly out to the compound: white guy, thirty years old, 5' 10", short brown hair, carrying a blue duffel bag. Ed had seen a couple of people fitting that description, but for some reason Hugh stuck out. Ed wondered if the guy was on something, he looked so wired.

"Hugh?" asked Ed, approaching the man, extending his hand.

"Yeah, hi. Ed?" Replied Hugh, taking the offered hand and shaking it with a nervous smile. Hugh liked the look of this fellow. He exuded fun and confidence. His hair receded up in a point and extended down in thin, angled sideburns, giving his face a Mickey Mouse frame. His eyes were a kindly brown, with dog-like eyebrows. He had the air of a real player, someone who got anything he wanted, but probably a good guy, too. That made Hugh feel worse, already knowing he was going to betray this man.

Ed directed him away from the international airlines' section of the airport to the area where the local pilots took off. They walked out onto the tarmac toward one of the small planes gathered here.

The long, pointed nose of their plane rose to a pair of windows that looked like cartoon goggles. The aerodynamics of the nose disappeared where it spread into the plane's body, which seemed to be made from a refrigerator box. The wings could have been a surfboard plopped on top of the body, with a smaller one stuck through the tail. Two propellers hung on either side of the body, and one jutted forward from the tail, up over the rest of the plane. It was held up off the ground by, perhaps, shopping cart wheels.

Hugh looked at Ed, who smiled and gestured for him to climb in. The plane was already stuffed to capacity with supplies. Ed reached in and hurled a few things further back into the plane, clearing another of the eight seats for him. Hugh stepped in and took his seat. He fastened his seat belt, pulling on it until it pressed tight against

his pelvic bones. Ed jumped in and closed the door behind him, then slapped his hand twice on the pilot's seat. The pilot turned around and smiled, giving a thumbs-up sign.

~

The air in the plane cooled as they reached their cruising altitude. Ed put a loose canvas shirt over the sleeveless black jersey he wore at the airport. Hugh was still in his early spring overcoat — too warm down at the airport, but up here it served nicely. He bought it for the Canadian not-quite-winter, not-quite-spring days of seasonal bait and switch. Though he still protested to Americans that Canada wasn't as wintry as they portrayed it, he was glad to leave spring to work itself out.

The plane was noisy, so Hugh was saved from making conversation. He closed his eyes and napped, waking when he felt his gut sink: the plane was dipping. He instinctively looked to Ed for an explanation.

"Storm," Ed yelled over the sound of the engines. "We're going into the 'green' season. Summer's ending, and there are lots of storms. Don't worry, though, Alfredo will get us through it." He hit the pilot's seat again, and Alfredo turned around. "No problem, eh?" asked Ed. Alfredo smiled and gave the thumb again. Hugh wasn't convinced.

~

Hugh stepped out of the shower and dried himself off with one of the thin hotel towels. He wrapped it around his waist and walked back into the room, where Ed flipped through channels on the TV and dropped cashews into his mouth from his fist. "So what do you want to do tonight?" he asked, chewing.

Hugh zipped open his duffel bag. "I dunno. What's there to do here?" He pulled out a thin, short-sleeved polyester shirt, a loose pair of trousers, and some underwear, all of which he folded into a pile and carried back into the bathroom.

He heard Ed through the door: "Let's get a few cervezas and find out who you are." Hugh saw himself in the mirror, looking panicked. He pulled his hand down his face, trying to relax the muscles there. He cocked his head and smiled, then rolled his eyes. How he would carry this off, he had no idea.

He dropped his towel and pulled on his undershorts. *Okay, he thought to himself, you're not the bad one here. This company is doing something it shouldn't, something dangerous.* He pulled on his trousers then put on the shirt and looked at himself in the mirror as he buttoned it. *This isn't about Ed, it's about the company he works for.* Hugh got a comb from his wash kit and parted his hair to one side. *Besides, maybe Ed doesn't know anything. Maybe there's nothing to know.*

He smiled again. This time it felt more genuine. This was fine. Everything was fine.

~

The hotel was painted turquoise from the ground up to its rusty corrugated metal roof. Their room was on the second of its two floors. The words "*Soda — Restaurante — Hotel*" were painted on the front of the building.

The two men emerged from their door onto the balcony and took the covered stairs at its end down to the street. The night was clear; the afternoon's rains had cooled the air. Hugh motioned toward the hotel restaurant, but Ed shook his head and pointed down the roughly-paved street to a small cantina. Hugh followed Ed's lead.

~

"So what exactly do you do here?" asked Hugh.

"Supplies. Indigenics is from the First World, so they're not used to smaller economies like the one here. They needed someone to help them, you know, find what they needed without getting ripped off."

"Wheeling and dealing," said Hugh with a grin.

"Well, sort of." He conceded the point, and grinned back. "Yeah, it's a gift." Then he leaned on the table with an earnest look. "But the company was also concerned about not upsetting the local economy."

"Really?" asked Hugh, incredulous, "A pharmaceutical giant? Concerned about local economies?"

"Yeah. Why else do you think I'd keep coming back to work for them season after season? Surely you did some homework before you accepted this job."

Hugh suppressed a wince. "Well, honestly, I made the decision kind of suddenly. I don't know much about Indigenics, I was just looking for a change."

"Well, whatever you've heard, forget it. They're not some evil drug empire. It's not even that big a company. And they're pretty committed to helping people. They've come up with treatments for *eight* different diseases, and that's even after they had their hands tied by that stupid treaty."

"Asilomar?"

"Yeah. Indigenics was on the verge of some really big things. Anyway, they're the best employer I've ever had. And they don't mind my travelling in-between seasons." Ed sat back in his chair. "Enough about work," he said, then swallowed the rest of his beer. "Your round."

"Sure," said Hugh, raising a hand for the waiter. "So how do we get there from here?"

"Just a little bit north. There's no buses that go there, and we've got those supplies out back, so some of the others on the team will come and get us — Elena, Esteban, and Federico. You'll like them, they're a blast. Well, except Federico. Anyway, they'll be coming down with a few of the Wilys."

Hugh's face went pale. "What did you say? The what?"

"Wilys. Sorry, jeeps. Down here some people still call them that, after the company that first made them."

"Oh," said Hugh.

~

"Ed! Look at this!" said Hugh, holding up his hand.

"What am I looking at?" asked Ed. He walked from the jeep to the side of the road, where Hugh hunkered down near the ground.

"Look at this little guy. He's beautiful."

Ed could see it now, a tiny frog whose moist red body tapered to black legs mottled with blue. "Hugh," he said calmly, "do you have any open wounds on your hand?"

"No."

"Good. So you won't go into convulsions and die. I think you want to put the frog down."

"Oh," said Hugh. He tipped the tiny wet creature from his palm. The frog splayed like a little fingerpainter's hand and fell into the greenery below.

"Go see Elena, and she'll make sure you're okay. And don't touch anything."

Hugh walked toward Elena, passing Federico, whose heavy cheek pulled to one side as he looked at Hugh and made a "Tsk" sound.

Hugh told Elena about the frog. She asked what it looked like, and he described it to her. "Ahh," she said, "The poison arrow frog, *Dendrobates*." Hugh smiled: useless Latin names for things were usually his specialty. "Hundreds of different alkaloids in its skin."

Elena held Hugh's hand from the bottom as she sterilised it. She was the team's botanist, but she seemed to know her way around the first aid kit, too. Hugh looked at her. She was a *Tico*, or in her case *Tica*, Ed had informed him just before they made this roadside stop, a native Costa Rican. Her smooth skin was the colour of the mud puddles beside the road. Her thick, black hair, wet from the mist that surrounded them, was twisted back out of the way. She wore a thick, rough silver necklace. Finished with his hand, she dropped it and looked up to catch him staring at her. He smiled, hoping she wouldn't get the wrong idea. The professional smile she gave in return put him at ease; a bit of bedside manner from the botanist. He was impressed, and liked her.

Elena packed up her kit and put it back in the jeep she was sharing with Federico. The back was loaded down with half the supplies Ed brought, covered over with a rust-coloured tarpaulin.

Hugh returned to the other jeep and got in the back seat with the supplies there. Esteban started the engine, back from the pee-break that occasioned their stop. Esteban fit Ed's description of *Ticos*: friendly and helpful. *If that's what Ticos are like, thought Hugh, then Federico must be from somewhere else.*

As they drove away, Ed recounted the frog story to Esteban, who laughed. "What did Federico say?" asked Esteban. He raised his voice above the sound of the jeep's engine as it bumped along the patchy asphalt road.

"Oh, you know, nothing, but he said enough." He turned to Hugh. "Don't worry: it's not about you. He hates all the *gringos* who come to work here. He's managed the teams for years, and now he figures that we're all just spoiled American brats, here for a vacation."

"Hey, I resent that," said Hugh with a laugh, "I'm Canadian!"

The jeep turned a corner, clearing the thick woods, which gave way to a view of the valley below. Deep green waves of forest stretched before them, with hilltops that disappeared into the low grey clouds, clouds that seemed to rise like steam from the trees themselves.

Hugh spotted a fiery-coloured patch of trees in the valley. He leaned forward and pointed.

"*Malinche*," said Esteban.

Hugh reached down to the jeep's floor for one of the guidebooks Esteban brought him. He flipped until he found the flame-coloured tree: *Delonix regia*. "How could you forget a name like that?" he wondered. But then, he didn't know how people forgot anything.

~

The jeep turned off onto a side road. Esteban steered carefully to stay out of the deep ruts that had hardened in the dirt since the last big rain. After a few minutes, the thick trees opened to a clearing.

The Indigenics compound was surrounded by buildings, all evidently built at different times for different purposes.

Ed jumped from the jeep as Esteban pulled to a stop. "I'm just going to tell Hugh where to put his things, okay? We'll come back and help unload the supplies when the others show up. C'mon, Hugh."

Hugh got out and lifted up the tarpaulin that covered the back of the jeep. He pulled his duffel bag out from under the pile of boxes and bags and hoisted it to his shoulder, then followed Ed across the clearing. A few roughly-made picnic tables sat around the opening, but everything else in the camp rested along the edge of the trees. Ed walked toward three buildings set close together, part of the original camp, it seemed, because of their age. Their sides were vertical planks of wood sporting different colours of paint — turquoise, brown, rust, or white — depending on when they'd last been replaced. The window frames were stuck into the walls, so unevenly in places that there were gaps around them stuffed with rags and stapled over with plastic. The curtains inside were sheets, some plain, some patterned.

"These first two," said Ed, "are the bunk houses. The other one is the kitchen." The only feature that differentiated the kitchen from the others was the small metal chimney pipe poking out from its corrugated aluminium roof.

Ed opened the door of the first bunk house. "This is where you'll be staying with me and Esteban." He blocked the door and turned back to Hugh. "It's, uh, messy." He moved aside, and Hugh stepped in. It was warm inside and still smelled of sleeping men. The sheet-curtains blocked most of the light, leaving the room in a dim reddish gloom. Two-tiered bunks sat on either side. Ed and Esteban had taken the bottom beds, Hugh judged from the nests there of sheets and socks, khakis and T-shirts.

On the opposite side of the room sat a desk. Maybe. All Hugh could tell was that some object supported a mound of books, magazines, and clear glass beer bottles. The kitchen-type chair facing it was split in a few places, critically wounded.

"It's, um..." said Hugh.

"Don't worry. You won't be spending much time in here. I promise: in a week's time, you won't care."

"All right," said Hugh, walking farther into the room. He looked at the two top bunks. It likely didn't make a difference to them which he took, but he had trouble deciding. *Routines get set up quickly, he thought, and then it's easy to forget that things could be done differently.*

Hugh caught himself. "It doesn't matter!" he said, laughing. He growled to himself in frustration, shook his head, and hurled his bag arbitrarily onto the bunk to his right.

"O-kay," said Ed, not quite sure what to make of the outburst, "you're moved in."

They walked back out to the open lot, where Esteban, Elena, and Federico were unloading the jeeps. Ed pointed to their right, "That's the boat house." Long canoes lay near the shack of gap-toothed planks. Its roof was made of thatched leaves. "That's the lab," continued Ed, flinging a hand to his left. Hugh looked across the compound to see a long, glass-fronted rectangle of a building.

"What are those?" asked Hugh, motioning to the right of the lab, where rows of shapes like full sails, greenhouses seemingly made of bedsheets, lay close to the ground.

"Those are for drying coffee. But lately we've been using them to shelter new strains of plants."

"You grow coffee?"

"Yeah," said Ed, "this area had a lot of coffee plantations, but the volcano's been really active the last couple of years. The gases and acid rain killed off most of the crops. So Indigenics got the land for a song, then developed a way to grow the coffee again. That covered a lot of our operating costs until we got established down here —

not a lot of research grants for our kind of work anymore.” Hugh was going to ask what exactly their work was, but decided to be patient. “We’ve made a number of discoveries since then, and that’s freed us up. Now we rent out the coffee land. It’s a lot less work. You picked a good year to come.”

They joined the others. A woman wheeled a dolly-cart toward them. She was the shortest among them, and had wavy red hair that tumbled around her face. Hugh couldn’t tell if she was fat, or her overalls just gave that impression. She looked at Hugh and popped open a smile. Her face was pale white except for a sunburnt patch that spread from her tiny nose to her cheeks. She raised a hand from the dolly’s handles to wave, then extended it when she got within shaking range. “Hi, I’m Rionna,” she said with so much enthusiasm it startled him. He shook her hand, and said his name in return.

Federico was in charge, but worked silently in the background. Elena directed the delivery of the laboratory supplies, while Esteban took charge of the bits of machinery. Hugh took several armloads of each to their various spots. Some went to the boat house, which also doubled as a makeshift garage. Some went to the supply shed behind the lab. The last box Hugh picked up was marked “Rudiger — Fragile”.

“Where do I take this?” Hugh asked Elena.

“Oh, take it to Doctor Rudiger’s house.”

“Where’s that?”

She pointed to the rear of the compound between the bunk houses and the lab. Hugh was confused, about to ask again, when he saw it: a tall, narrow glass house. The glass was coated in such a way that he couldn’t see inside, and it reflected the trees around it. Hugh headed toward it with the small, heavy box in his arms.

When he reached the house, he climbed the metal stairs to the front door. He was just about to turn the handle, when Federico yelled at him: “Hey! What are you doing?”

Hugh stopped in his tracks, one hand on the door handle, the other holding the box balanced on his knee. “Uh, Elena said this box should go to Doctor Rudiger’s house.”

“To the house, yes, but not inside. The doctor values his privacy very much. So if you want to continue having a job, you won’t go into his home.”

“Okay, sure,” said Hugh. He supposed that made sense, with different people working here every year, his private home and all. But still, Hugh thought, Federico didn’t have to snap at him. “So, what should I do? Just leave it here on the doorstep?”

“Yes. I’ll take it inside later.”

“The doctor isn’t here?”

“No,” said Federico, “he’ll be back in a few days.”

As Hugh pulled his hand from the doorknob he gave it a slight twist to test it: *locked*. He put the box down on the steps and went back to the jeeps to see if there was anything else to put away. Rionna passed in the other direction with her cart loaded down. She smiled and waved again as she passed.

~

Hugh put down his book. He’d been studying for hours and needed a break. He looked up to see Elena, her nose an inch away from the plant she snipped at with scissors by the sink. Rionna lifted a monkey back into its cage, finished whatever test she was running on it.

Hugh still wasn’t involved in the business of the place. There was too much for him to learn before he could get to work, things very specific to their research that

he'd never had occasion to look into before. Some of it was familiar from his pre-med days, but most of it was obscure, intricacies of botany and zoology.

Rionna noticed him. "How's the studying going?" she asked.

"Oh, just fine. I think I'm getting it," he replied. He was, in fact, pacing himself. He was two weeks ahead in the material they'd given him, but he didn't tell them that. For one, he didn't want to let on about his memory. And he was also trying his hardest to really *learn* the material. He wanted not just to recall it, but to really grasp its significance, to make the mental connections necessary to understand their work. Otherwise, he figured, he wouldn't be of any use either to Indigenics or to Nadine.

Even though it was easy to retain the material, he found himself getting tired, his brain turning to mush after a few hours. That part he didn't have to fake. He looked forward to his afternoons with Federico and Esteban, who were getting as much physical labour as they could from him before he started thinking of himself as one of the scientists. Today they had to tune up the riverboat and move a few hundred pounds of topsoil. It was mindless work, and that was a relief.

~

Hugh felt around for the small wire rack on the wall and put the soap back on it. He reached for the cord to douse himself with water again, but when he pulled it, no water came out. Soapy water ran from his hair into his eyes, and he didn't want to open them.

"Ahh," he called out, to no one in particular, "there's no water!"

He heard Ed's voice: "Do you want water?"

"Yeah, there doesn't seem to be any left."

"Oh, don't worry, there's lots of water," said Ed in a tone that made him nervous. The next instant, he heard the small door of the shower stall creak open on its hinge, and he was forcibly grabbed. In spite of himself, he opened his eyes to find himself being carried like a carpet by Ed and Esteban. His heart pounded as he wondered if they'd found him out. *What are they going to do with me?*

Then he saw Elena and Rionna following behind them, clapping, laughing, and cheering them on. He halfheartedly tried to struggle free, realising now that this was a joke. The men carried him from the stall at the back of the kitchen building and made the short hike to the boat house. Seconds later, they heaved him up into the air, and he fell with a splash into the river. He righted himself in the waist-deep water, wiping at his eyes as he stood up. The gang laughed affectionately from shore, and he laughed back. His feet sank slightly into the furry muck of the river-bottom. The warm water felt comfortable against his skin, as was the air.

"Now you belong," said Esteban. Hugh smiled. He liked the sound of that.

"But you'd better get out quick," said Elena, "before something bites you."

Hugh's smile dropped. He pulled his feet from the muck and ran splashing from the river.

~

The week since Hugh arrived had been unseasonably dry, so they'd eaten most of their meals outside — except for Federico, who lived in a room in Doctor Rudiger's house, and ate his meals there, too, even when the doctor was away. Tonight Esteban made supper, a traditional *casado* — fish he'd caught, served with black beans and rice, a kind of coleslaw, and fried plantain, which Hugh found was like banana, only more mealy, less sweet. They each finished every bit of it, and tried to talk Esteban into cooking every night. He refused.

"But you won't ever have to do the dishes," said Rionna.

"I don't mind the dishes that much," he replied.

"Pleeeeeease," she begged, "don't make me eat Ed's cooking again." Ed swatted the back of her head, sending up a wave of red hair. "Hey!" she protested.

"It's true, Ed. You can't cook," said Hugh with a serious face. He felt comfortable enough with the group to take liberties. "A vote, anyone? Who agrees with me?" The rest put up their hands.

"Oh, fine," said Ed, "Then I guess you won't be interested in what I brought for dessert." The group's tones of agreement quickly turned to retractions. "Well, if you really mean it..." he said, and produced a bottle of amber-coloured rum with one hand. Then a bottle of beer showed up in his other.

"We're so sorry," said Elena.

"We were just trying to make Esteban feel good," said Rionna.

"Okay, okay," conceded Ed, "that's good enough." He distributed bottles of beer from the box at his feet, and Rionna ran to the kitchen to fetch glasses and cola for the rum.

They took their drinks and left the picnic table. It was still covered in dirty plates, cutlery, and condiments, which was usually against protocol, as it attracted wildlife. But they all knew that at night at least two dozen different types of creatures descended on the camp anyway, trying to find scraps.

They walked down to the riverbank, where a couple of wooden chairs and a weather-worn church pew were set up for just such occasions. They sat talking and laughing as they watched the sun descend into the trees. The sky changed into a pastel spectrum, and the trees became mere silhouettes.

Hugh watched the river with awe. "It looks like lava," he said.

Ed threw an arm over Hugh's shoulder, "You want lava? We can show you lava. You forget, we're practically next door to a volcano. Esteban, I'm wrecked. How are you to drive?"

~

The glassy black rock crunched and snapped underfoot. "Don't fall," said Elena. "At least, if you do, don't put out your hands. This rock is sharp."

They climbed the side of the small mountain. The moon gave a thin black and white luminance to the landscape. Wherever there was shadow, though, the darkness was complete, a pool of nothingness. Hugh loved this lunar landscape, and was completely taken with his new friends. Not only were they smart and good at what they did, they were *fun*. The very fact of their being here meant that they were risk-takers, he thought as he hiked. They'd all walked off the margins of their lives to be here, just as he had.

Everyone carried a flashlight of some sort, though only Ed and Esteban used them as they scurried ahead of the others. "Just a little further," said Ed over his shoulder. Hugh had no idea how far they'd walked since they left the jeep, but it didn't matter. They could sleep in tomorrow; they made up their own schedules here.

"Are you having fun?" said a voice. Hugh turned to find Rionna beside him.

"Yeah. This is great. I mean—" he gestured around him, "I've never seen anything like this before in my life."

"This is just the beginning, Hugh. This place is amazing. There are so many different things to see in this country. You'll never want to leave."

Hugh smiled in response. He could imagine that easily right now. A thought of Nadine tried to press itself into his consciousness, of what he was really here for, but he ignored it. He wasn't quite sure how, but maybe he could make things work out so

he wouldn't have to choose sides. *Maybe if*— But he lost the thought as he looked up at the landscape ahead, where Ed and Esteban had just dipped out of sight.

"C'mon," said Elena, tapping Hugh and Rionna on the arms as she passed them, "I think they've found it."

The earth was split open. Some of the volcanic mountainside had heaved and cracked, forming a small rift. Ed and Esteban perched on either side of it, peering down into the narrow crevasse. As Hugh got closer, he could feel the heat increasing, and when he crouched and tipped his head to look in, he felt like he was sticking his head into an oven. The sensation was overwhelming, particularly since he was still a bit drunk.

There it was, at the bottom of the rift: lava. It was mostly black, but it was definitely moving, and from time to time it split, then Hugh could see the molten rock glowing through. It reminded him of all those scabby knees he had as a child, the way they'd sometimes break open and bleed if he bent his leg too much. He smiled as he remembered riding his bike through the subdivision on a summer day, racing to catch up with — *with someone*.

"It's really something, isn't it Hugh?" asked Esteban.

Hugh looked up, not smiling anymore. This was why he didn't like drinking: one stray thought and he'd get moody. Suddenly he wanted to leave everyone and go off by himself. Luckily, Esteban recognised the expression on Hugh's face, the look that said Hugh was thinking too much.

"Come on," said Esteban, standing and taking Hugh by the arm. "*Balnearios*, anyone?" he asked, and the others hooted and cheered — about what, Hugh had no idea. He'd yet to study Spanish.

They clambered to their feet and hiked back toward the base of the mountain, but in a different direction from the way they'd come.

~

The night air was surprisingly cool, given the heat of the day, so it didn't seem odd to Hugh that the water up ahead steamed. Ed and Esteban were already there, pulling off their boots and shirts, then dropping their trousers and shorts. Judging from the sounds they made as they jumped in, Hugh realised the water wasn't just warmer than the air, it was boiling hot.

Elena and Rionna followed their lead, stripping unselfconsciously. Hugh was taken aback by their comfort with each other. He couldn't help looking at the others' bodies as he joined them. Esteban was stocky, dark, and almost hairless. Ed was a little shorter than average, and it was easy to see the muscles working under his pasty flesh. Their penises flopped absently as the men cavorted in the water; nothing here to make Hugh feel inferior. And, yes, he saw: Rionna *was* fat. He hadn't seen many naked women in general, let alone fat ones. He found Rionna's body compelling in its difference, though; not objectionable at all, just different. Her small breasts pointed from her chest, and he felt odd seeing the patch of hair on her groin. Elena was just as lithe and shapely as he would have guessed. She was slim in all the right places, full and heavy in other right places. He didn't know where he got these guidelines from, but he was sure that in another lifetime she'd be the one he'd pick.

He took off his clothes a piece at a time. *Oh well*, he figured, *nothing they haven't already seen*. He was no paler than Ed, and not in bad shape; he was healthy enough, but that was about the extent of it. He hadn't made anything of his body.

The pool was twenty feet across. As he tugged off his last sock, Hugh judged the depth of the water and made a run, cannonballing in.

As he pounded into the water he felt like the heat would kill him. He was used to cold shocks in Ontario lakes at the beginning of summer. For a moment he was scared, his body hurt so. He looked at the others as he treaded water, and they were fine. He clenched his jaw and waited for the heat to sink in.

The others splashed and ducked each other in the water, playing like children at a pool party. *It's harder to convince yourself of innocence as a grown-up*, thought Hugh. *Sex is always lurking in the background, waiting to redefine everything.* Though here there was a kind of open acknowledgement of that touch of sex between them, and it made things somehow innocent again in a different way. Hugh jumped into the fray, drunkenly enjoying the contact with the others. The water was so warm that he could hardly tell where he ended; they were all just part of the pool, bits of nature.

He put his feet down on the silty floor at the edge of the pool and looked around. They were swimming in a small crater. The rough volcanic mountain rose from a landscape of trees like tightly-packed broccoli heads, but black in the night. He could see their coffee land from here, steppes cut from the countryside. He slid back slowly in the deeper water and floated, looking up. The moon had slipped away to one side; the sky overhead was spiced with stars. Down on the horizon, in the direction of the compound, tall clouds crawled in, smudging out the lights.

~

The canoe slipped easily through the river as Hugh and Elena paddled. Rain fell steadily, as it had since Hugh woke up to hear it pattering on the bunkhouse's metal roof. They were dressed appropriately, though, so the rain wasn't a bother. The air was so humid and close that the drops felt like an expression of it, just as the little monkeys jumping overhead were part of the trees.

"Up here," said Elena, double-checking the map in a plastic envelope on her lap, then pointing toward the shore. "This is where Doctor Rudiger said he saw them."

They turned the boat in to the shallow water. Esteban showed Hugh a few days before how to canoe, and he remembered the instructions, but he found it difficult to get the strokes right in practice. He kept knocking his oar against the side of the rough wooden canoe with each stroke, and shifted his foam pad on the curved wooden seat every few minutes to try and find a comfortable position.

Elena jumped out first and pulled the boat up to the shore. Hugh stepped into the water and lifted his end awkwardly, pulling it parallel to the land. Elena's joke about things in the water biting still worried him. He quickly stepped up onto the dirt; his canvas shoes squished as he put his weight on them.

They climbed up from the shore, the dirt cliff crumbling damp in their fingers. As they entered the forest, Hugh was struck by the sheer density of it, from its floor to the canopy above. It had another distinguishing feature, too: it was alive. Everywhere around him something jumped, crawled, slithered, blew in the breeze, or crunched underfoot. He walked, his neck craned up at the epiphytes that dangled from the trees — vines as thick as his wrist — then he dropped his head and spotted a small black and red crab wandering sideways through the undergrowth on its way to some business that, to Hugh's surprise, didn't seem to include any water.

The moist air felt pre-breathed for him, like air under the covers, except that it was so clean, so rich with oxygen. The difference between city air and this was the difference between skim milk and a milkshake.

"Doctor Rudiger spends a lot of time on this part of the river," said Elena, leading them forward, though Hugh couldn't see any discernible path. It was strange to hear human language in the midst of this. "He keeps making discoveries here — new plants, and even a few varieties of animals that aren't documented anywhere else." She

turned back and gave a doubtful look, "I know it doesn't seem likely, but maybe there's been enough variations introduced by the volcanoes' activity to cause a change. I dunno." She gave her attention back to the map and compass she held in her left hand. "Feel free to make sense of it if you can."

After a short hike, they arrived in a clearing, where a patch of flowers grew. The flowers were tall, with thick stems. Their shiny heads looked like paper wedding bells dipped in purple wax.

"*Zingiba spectabile*," said Hugh. "Shampoo ginger."

"Good. But—" asked Elena.

"It's supposed to be red." Hugh crouched down near the edge of the patch. He looked up at Elena, puzzled. "And it's the wrong shape. It should be shaped more like a cattail."

"And this is the only place they've ever been seen." Elena sat down, crossed her legs, and leaned back on her arms. She sighed.

"You okay?" asked Hugh.

"Yeah. Fine. It's just—" she wiped her forehead with a hand, sighing. "It's awfully convenient." She swore under her breath, then stood up. "Well, we might as well take back some samples."

~

The little monkey screeched and snapped its sharp teeth at Hugh's fingers. Long white chops grew on either side of its tiny pink old man face. It jumped back, then flung itself sideways, banging mindlessly into the wire cage. "He just keeps getting worse," said Rionna. "He was perfectly normal when the doctor brought him in. But as he grew to maturity, well, something was off. We tried to send him out, but none of the groups of monkeys around here would have him. One minute he's in a stupor, the next he's acting rabid." She leaned as close as was safe to the monkey's cage, and tilted her head, looking at the broken little creature. "Poor guy. I'm going to give him another day or two, then I'll have to destroy him."

Hugh was surprised at how calmly she could say this.

~

Hugh banged his beer down on the table, shaking everyone else's bottles. "Dead soldier," he said automatically of his empty drink, puzzled to consider the words for the first time.

They'd been laughing at a joke Esteban told, a silly childhood play on words that only made sense in Spanish. It took Hugh a second to string together the sentence from the words Esteban used, but he got it, having studied up on the language now. And they were far enough into another of their party evenings that anything was funny.

Rain made a snare drum roll on the kitchen roof. Rionna gathered the cards from the table, shuffled them, then dealt another hand to everyone.

"I'm getting," said Hugh, standing and heading for the fridge. "Anyone else want another beer?" Ed and Elena flopped their hands into the air. "Oh no," said Hugh, opening the door.

"What?" asked Ed.

"We're out of beer."

"No we're not. There's more in the boat house."

"And since you're up," said Rionna.

"Yeah. New Guy rule," added Esteban.

"How many rules is that now?" said Hugh with a smirk as he went to the door. He stooped to put on his boots, but toppled over to one side. He snickered and finished putting them on from the floor. "You guys go ahead and play a hand without me." He found his way back up to his feet and opened the door.

"Thank God," said Esteban, "maybe someone else will win for a change. If we've got any money left to play with."

"Hey, I let you guys win lots of times." The others snorted at his claim, taking it for a boast.

"What?" asked Ed, "are you counting cards or something?"

"No," replied Hugh matter-of-factly, "I just remember 'em all." He ducked outside. Big drops of rain pelted him as he dashed for the boat house.

Something moved in the bushes by the boat house. Hugh slipped to a stop and peered to see what it was.

It moved again. It was big, almost as big as he was.

His fears sketched all manner of demons in the leaves ahead, and he was about to run for his life back to the others. But then he heard the thing make a sound.

"Hugh."

"Huh?" he said, cocking his head, moving forward.

"It's Nadine."

"Oh my God!" he said. He reached forward to help her up. "Come on, come into the boathouse." He opened the door and led her into the dark shack.

He winced as he heard her smack into something and let out an "Ow!" He quickly found the battery-powered lamp they kept by the door and switched it on. He saw Nadine giving an accusatory look at the outboard motor she'd walked into.

She was smeared with mud, and her skin was blotchy, covered in insect bites or hives. Her eyes looked like they were sinking into her head. She could read the expression on his face as he took in the sight of her, "That bad, eh?"

"No, it's just — yeah. You look like hell. What happened to you?"

"Everything. The only place I could rent anywhere near here is a hideous shack. I get eaten every night in my sleep. I was robbed by the man who took me downstream in his boat to my shack. And I've had dysentery since my first meal."

"So this would probably be a bad time to ask for my paycheck," said Hugh, stifling a giggle behind his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm drunk."

"Oh," said Nadine. It had never occurred to her that he might wind up enjoying himself.

"Sorry. Don't worry, they're paying me. I'm fine," he said, trying to muster up some decorum.

"Well, I just wanted to catch up with you, to see how you're doing and find out if you've got anything for us."

He felt nauseous being reminded about his mission. His eyes fell to the floor. "Uh, no. Not really anything yet."

Nadine gently grabbed his chin and raised his face to look into hers. "Hugh, I don't want to be the heavy, but we really need you."

"Nadine, these are not bad people."

"I'm not saying that they are, but the things that Rudiger is doing, they're dangerous. They're a threat. I'm serious. I need you to stay focused." She let go of his face, though it kept the same slack-jawed expression it had taken in her hand. "Have you seen anything unusual?"

"Well, we have been finding some species of plants and animals that are unique to this area."

Her eyebrows took flight from their perch. "Who found them? You? The others? Or Rudiger?"

"Rudiger."
"But he's not here," she said.
"No, I know. I haven't met him yet. But he gave us directions to the sites where he found them."
"Hugh, he didn't find them. He *put* them there."
"What?"
"He *made* them."

~

Hugh pushed the door closed with his backside, put the case of beer on the floor, and crouched down to take off his boots. When he stood up, he found the others turned in their chairs, staring at him. His heart sank.

"What?"
Ed spoke for them. "What do you mean, you *remember* the cards?"
Hugh sighed with relief. "Oh, that." Why did he have to mention that? Oh well, he figured, might as well give away one secret to keep another. He just regretted what would follow, the pattern that he'd seen play itself out since he was a child: first it would be neat, a parlour trick. He'd get some attention from that, then it would start to bother them as they measured themselves against him. Then they'd find it creepy. Only two people in his life so far had known how to deal with it, and one was his mother.

They might as well hate him anyway, he thought, since he was here to betray them. He slid the beer case to his chair, opened it, sat, and handed out bottles.

"What is it?" Ed asked. "A trick?"
"No," replied Hugh, "I just remember. Okay, here, let's play a little game. Whose deal is it?"

"Ed's," said Elena.
"Right. Ed, deal everybody a hand, but not me. You guys play, and I'll just watch."

"Okay," said Ed, not sure what was going to happen. He dealt the cards, and they played until the hand was finished. "Now what?" asked Ed.

"You wanted the King of Hearts, didn't you, Esteban? That would have given you a royal flush." Esteban nodded. "But instead you got the Four of Hearts, then Three of Clubs, and lost the hand. Elena, you had squat — Five of Diamonds, Six of Clubs, the Ace of Spades, and the Two and Three of Hearts. You kept the hearts and the ace — for whatever reason — and traded in the others. You got the Two of Clubs and the Five of Diamonds. You decided to go with the twos to try to salvage something, and still kept that ace. But you got the Queen of Spades and the Four of Diamonds." He continued, telling the others what they'd been dealt and what they played, then named all the cards left in the deck.

"How'd you do that?" asked Rionna.
"You counted cards on us?" Ed seethed. "We're playing a friendly game here. I can't believe you'd cheat us and take our money."

"I didn't, Ed, I swear. I just remembered. I remember every hand we've played since I got here. I remember everything." He stood up from the table and headed for the door. He pushed his feet into his boots. "Elena, that book by the stove. Page one hundred and fifty-two; at the top, it says, 'Screening for insurance purposes had become a widespread practice by '09. Common tests included mucopolysaccharidosis, hemochromatosis, phenylketonuria, and Huntington's disease. But in '12 the practice was determined to be a violation of an individual's constitutional rights by the United States Supreme Court case *Gregson versus the American Council of Life Insurance*.'"

He walked out into the rain.

They looked back and forth at each other. Ed nodded, got his boots on, and ran outside. Hugh sat on one of the picnic tables, maybe crying; in the rain Ed couldn't tell.

Ed sat down in the wet next to Hugh and put his arm around him. "Okay, buddy?" he asked.

Hugh looked up and tried to laugh. It didn't work, so he just looked earnestly at Ed and said, "I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. It was a mistake. None of us have seen that before," said Ed, squeezing Hugh's shoulder. He stood up. "C'mon. Come back inside."

Hugh looked down, nodding. He stood up, and raised his head. He looked at Ed, and promised himself that somehow he'd keep his friends safe when this all came down. That's the only way, he figured, he could keep going with a clear conscience.

He smiled to Ed and gave a shaky laugh. Then they went back inside. He saw Rionna guiltily closing the book he'd quoted from. But none of them mentioned his memory again.

Chapter 7

"Honey, be careful with that!"

"Simon, I don't even know what it is," she replied, advancing with it in her hand. The matte black object had several silver dots on its surface, like a domino, but was the size and shape of a wallet.

He spoke quickly, backing away from her. "It's a present, for finishing your course. If you press that button, it'll measure the size of the room, and even figure out how much paint you'd need to paint it. And if you tell it the price of a litre of paint, it'll say how much the whole room will cost. I thought you'd like it." He stopped, backed up against the small bar in the middle of the kitchen. "Fleur?"

She stopped, and looked at it, interested. "Really?" She pressed a button on its side, and small beams projected from the dots. The pale blue light flickered over the two of them, seemed to figure that they weren't parts of the room, and moved out to the walls. "Neat. Just one question," she said, looking at him, halfway between two moods, "How did you pay for it?"

"Uh," he started, trying to look casual as he slipped from between her and the breakfast bar. He figured that if he sounded matter-of-fact she'd see his point and stay calm: "I put it on your credit card for now, until I get my cheque for last week's game."

Fleur shrieked and clenched her fist around the little box. It continued flickering as she looked at it then hurled it at Simon. Half anticipating this reaction, he twisted to one side and it flew past. She threw like a girl, he thought, style-wise. In terms of force, though, she had the arm of an orangutan. The box tore through a hanging paper globe lamp and smashed its bulb. The shade flashed blue for a moment, then Simon heard a muffled woman's voice inside the lampshade say "This room is one cubic foot in volume."

That's about what it feels like, too, he thought.

"You bought me a gift with my own money?" she asked, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. She admired the plaster work she'd contracted, but it offered her no consolation. Trying once more to make sense of her husband, she asked "So what happened to the money in your account?"

He knew there was no point in being evasive now. "I spent it," he said.

"Oh, and what did you spend all your money on?"

"On new shoes. I bought new shoes. My old ones had no tread on them. I'm playing with old equipment, and it's dangerous."

She gritted her teeth. "Oh, here's an idea: how about you not playing at all?"

"Fleur, come on," he said, hurt. "This could pay off any time now. The guys and I were talking about this the other day. You know, with the baseball and hockey leagues on strike, something big might happen for lacrosse."

"Mmm. Is that what the guys were saying?"

"Yeah. We're playing really well, too. You've been following: we can make it to the playoffs if we just win tomorrow then next week in New York—"

"New York? How are you getting to New York?" She was creeping up on him again.

"Flying."

"And who's paying for the ticket?"

Simon closed his eyes. "You did." He opened them in time to see her hauling back to hit him. He dipped his head to one side, and she missed, tumbling forward. *She should know better,* he thought. No one had ever won a fair fight against him.

She ran after him, but he kept ducking away, so she pounded him on the back. He ran into the kitchen, then turned around when she stopped hitting him, "Fleur, you—" She rifled through junk drawer, then stood up with a meat tenderizer in her hand, its spiky face pointed at him.

"I swear, Simon, you are trying to ruin me and my plans, and—" she swung the meat-mallet between words, "I-would-rather-kill-you-first!" Each time he dodged and she missed, as they worked their way into the living room.

"What about me?" he asked, "I have plans, t—" She threw the tenderiser. He ducked behind the couch, and the tiny metal hammer clunked off the wall and clattered to the floor.

The couch was a skinny, modern style, and wouldn't afford him much protection. He looked under it to see where Fleur's legs were: walking back to the kitchen. Simon could picture any number of other implements there that she might decide to use. He stood, and made for the front door.

Outside, he walked around to the back of the house and tiptoed to look in the kitchen window. She wasn't there. He went back to the front door. As he reached for the handle, he heard the deadbolt lock with a click.

"Fleur? Honey?" He knocked gently. "Fleur?" He rang the doorbell.

No answer.

He checked his watch. "What about your show tonight? We have to eat supper and get ready. Honey?" He pushed his hand through his drooping, curly bangs.

He checked his pocket: wallet and car key. *Thank God.* He addressed the door. "Okay, Fleur, I'm going to go out for a bit to get something to eat. I'll be back in time to get ready." He was about to ask if she wanted anything, but then thought better of it, afraid to hear what she might say.

~

They walked through the heavy doors into the hall. The interior design class exhibition was set up in the foyer and the corridors around it. They walked past undersized living rooms, recreation rooms, and kitchens, each seemingly gutted out of a house, with three wooden walls like a stage set.

"Hey," said Simon, "this is kind of neat. Where's yours?" He tried to be pleasant, to make conversation, but Fleur still wasn't speaking to him. He gave up, figuring that she'd lead him to her display anyway.

"Hello, Ms. Williams," said a tall, smiling man, stepping forward and taking her hand gently.

"It's Mrs. Williams, actually," said Simon, stepping in. "I'm her husband... Simon... Williams." He meant it as a friendly correction, an opening line, but it hung in the air like an accusation. Simon smiled and offered his hand to the man, who took it and smiled back weakly. "Are you her instructor?" Simon asked.

The man's face made an expression like he'd inhaled a fly. "No. I'm the organiser of this event."

Fleur turned to Simon. *My God*, he thought, *she's going to speak to me!* She did, though she addressed him slowly, as if speaking while signing to a chimpanzee. "Simon, this is Winston Roth, the head of the Design Exchange."

"Oh," said Simon, raising his eyebrows. "Nice to meet you. Fleur's mentioned your work a number of times. She's a big fan."

Winston Roth looked at Fleur, surprised, then smiled. Then he excused himself and waded into the crowd, still wearing his button-hole of a grin.

Fleur snickered in spite of herself.

"What?" asked Simon.

"Everyone hates his work. It's really awful. Yet somehow he's still an arrogant jerk."

"Well, I guess he likes you now."

"Or else he likes you. But thanks, Simon. He's a good person to know." She smiled, giving up her grudge. "Come on. Let's get a drink, and I'll show you my room."

As they walked past a cheese tray, Simon loaded a napkin full, then grabbed a few olives from a dish. At the bar, she ordered martinis for them.

"Ooh," said Simon, "special occasion."

"I don't imagine gin will stay on my hips," she said.

Drinks in hand, they walked away from what Simon took to be the main display. He pointed back, but Fleur shook her head. They walked up the beige marble staircase with a curling stainless steel handrail.

They walked into a large room that Simon mistook at first for a wooden gymnasium. A staircase rose from the room's floor, leading to a walkway around the room. Above the walkway was a mural of angular Deco figures doing various types of work.

"This is the old stock exchange," said Fleur. The overhead lights burned low. A temporary stage stood at the front of the room, but it was dark.

"Should we be up here?" asked Simon.

"Yeah, we should," she said, smiling confidently. She gestured for him to put his drink down on the table by the door.

Several structures stood on the floor, like the small sets downstairs, but these were larger and draped in black velvet like luxury tents. She led Simon to the middlemost tent and pointed shyly at the podium next to it. The small printed card on it read "Winning Entry: Fleur Williams".

"Fleur!" said Simon, elated, "that's great! I thought this was just a kind of graduation. I didn't realise it was a competition."

"Each of the us got to submit one of our designs to be judged. I guess they liked mine the best." She was proud behind a little girl smile.

Simon liked that look; it turned him on. He leaned forward and kissed her. He spoke quietly into her forehead, "I am very proud of you. And I am very happy for you." He stood back and looked her in the eye. "Can I see it?"

She looked worried. *She thinks I won't like it*, he thought, then worried himself. *What if I don't like it?* He smiled anyway, and moved toward the curtain. Fleur drew it open with her hand and Simon stepped inside.

Simon took a breath, surprised. "Fleur, it's—" he looked at her, half-smiling, half frowning, tears welling in his eyes. He turned back again to the little room. Almost breathlessly, he whispered, "It's perfect." He ran his hands along the sheets of the small bed, along the dresser, then he reached up to touch the small, glowing galaxies she'd painted on the artificial ceiling of the room. Everywhere he looked, the detail was perfect, as if he was standing in a dream.

"It's his room. It's the room we always talked about, for our little boy." She hugged him, and they both laughed and cried, joyous and longing in the same instant. The room was an inspired blend of beautiful lines and such honest fun that any child could spend a dozen rainy days there and not mind. "It's perfect. You're so talented, Fleur. I never knew. I love it. I love you."

"I love you, too, Simon," she said, touching his chin with her finger. "You drive me crazy. I mean, in every way. Crazy bad, crazy good. Just crazy." They kissed again.

"So what does this mean, you winning this?" he asked.

"By itself, nothing really. I mean, it feels great, and I finally know that I really am good at this." She sat him down on the bed. "But lots of people will be coming to this show. People with money, who'll want work done. And they know people, other people with money, who know people. This is the start I need." She put her hand to her mouth. "It's happening for me."

"Man, this is great, honey. I'm so happy for you." He kissed her and pulled her up off the little bed. "Will they be announcing this at some point?"

"Yeah," she said, smoothing down the bedspread, "in about an hour."
"Well, we should go back downstairs and celebrate until then!"

~

Fleur walked up to Winston Roth, who stood by her velvet tent, which was now held open with gold cords. He handed her a piece of paper and shook her hand. The crowd applauded.

"That's my wife," said Simon, giving the woman next to him an overzealous nudge that made her drink slosh dangerously. He flipped an olive under his arm so it arced up over his head, then caught it in his mouth. "Woooo!" he hooted while chewing, raising a fist up in the air and windmilling it. Fleur looked over, half mortified, yet doing the same thing on the inside. She gave him a big smile the likes of which he'd not seen in a while.

~

Simon walked from the bedroom to the kitchen. Something smelled good. "Fleur?" he asked, turning his head around the corner. "Whatcha makin'?"

"Breakfast," she replied, smiling, standing by the stove with a spatula in her hand.

"My God!" exclaimed Simon. "You look like — I cannot remember word. How you say in English? *Wife*?"

"Any more of that, and you'll taste the cold steel of my spatula. Just sit down and enjoy it, and don't go expecting this every Saturday."

He pulled a stool up to the bar in the middle of the kitchen.

"No, no, not there. This is a real sit-down breakfast," said Fleur, pointing to the kitchen table.

Simon looked over, and gasped. She'd spread a white tablecloth, on which she'd put blue and white broadcloth placemats and napkins, a pitcher of orange juice, and a small vase of yellow daisies. "Fleur, that's beautiful! It looks like an *advertisement* for breakfast."

"Go. Sit."

"Sure!" he said, moving to the table. "You must still be feeling pretty good about last night, eh?" She simply smiled in response, and carried over a plate full of pancakes. Simon dug in with his fork and pulled some over to his plate. Fleur took just one for herself.

"Oh, syrup!" said Simon. Fleur gave him a 'stay' hand, and got up to get it for him. "Wow. Are you going to be doing another of these shows soon?" She gave him a smirk over her shoulder.

"Hey," he said, "I'm sorry about, you know, when we got home. I had a lot to drink."

She returned with the bottle of syrup, and sat down. She thought for a moment, then spoke, "I was going to say that you shouldn't start something you can't finish. But then, we might never have sex."

"Fleur, I—"

"I don't know what's wrong, Simon. I wish you'd tell me."

"I was kind of out of it last night, you know, all those drinks..." Simon plopped his head on his hands, exasperated. "Fleur, I don't know. And if I did, I'd tell you. It's not you, you know that. It's never been easy... with anyone. It's like — like I'm broken somehow."

"Okay, forget it. We've had this conversation a hundred times, and it never makes any difference. I don't want you to be all upset today, because you've got your game tonight. Let's just have a nice breakfast."

"Okay," said Simon, "thanks." After a few bites, he remembered something. "Oh, there's a party after the game tonight. Nick's going to play with his band."

Fleur raised her eyebrows, but didn't look up from her breakfast, "How does he find the energy for that, after all that running around and everything?"

"C'mon, the game is a big adrenaline rush. You know me after a game: I can't sleep for hours."

"Doesn't he have a job, too?"

"Yeah, he's a firefighter." Simon immediately regretted giving her that bait.

"Really?" she asked, still not looking at him. "And you couldn't do that?"

"Fleur, the tests to become a fireman are really tough. They test you on everything — chemistry, physics, all kinds of stuff. And I've never been good at tests. Besides, being a fireman is a passion for Nick. For him, lacrosse is like playing guitar, it's just a hobby. If we were any busier, he'd drop out."

"Whereas," said Fleur, cutting out a small square of her fluffy yellow pancake, "you're a career player."

Simon nodded. *She finally understands.*

Fleur put down her fork. "Okay, if you're this dead-serious career lacrosse player, then I want you to promise me something."

"All right," said Simon, hesitating.

She pointed a finger at him and squinted her eyes. "I want you to play the best that you can tonight."

"But I always—"

"No. No you don't. You're constantly helping the others along and being so damned humble. Don't get me wrong, some of them are fine players. Like Rich. He's really good. But none of them are anything like you. I know you're the best player in the league. And do you know what? I don't think any of us have ever even seen you play your best."

"So," she said, standing and picking up her plate, "make me this promise. 'Cause if you're not willing to do your best at playing lacrosse, you might as well stop and get a real job so that you can contribute around here."

"Would you stop it with this 'real job' stuff? I went to your thing last night. I think I was pretty supportive. I was ready to be bored to tears, but I went anyway," said Simon, now standing, too.

"Thanks for not being too bored."

"Fleur, that's not what I meant. I meant that I was ready to try really hard to be interested. But I didn't have to. You really were good, and I was happy to be there. I don't know why you can't give me that same kind of respect."

"Well, maybe if I knew you weren't just fooling around—"

"Why do you always have to be like this? Why can't you just give me some support?"

"Why can't you give me some support?" she said, losing control. "Why can't you have some consideration for everything that I do for us, to pay our bills and keep us in this house?"

"I am! I'm doing the best I can to make this lacrosse thing work out. I can't be someone else, someone who's good at office things or firefighting or whatever else. I'm just not good at that stuff. I've found what I'm good at, and that's this game."

"Then make the promise!"

"Fleur, I—"

"Promise!"

“You don’t—”

Fleur put down her plate and slapped him hard on the cheek. And, like the silence after thunder, the air in the room filled with dead calm. She spoke quietly. “Simon, don’t you see? The only way you’re going to get what you want is if you do this. I want you to win. So make the promise.”

Stunned, Simon looked at her. He felt odd saying it, being forced into this corner, but now he got the sense of what she told him. “I promise.” Then he smiled, pressed her up against the table, and kissed her. She kissed him back, and pulled him closer, leaning back onto the table. Simon followed the motion. They started pulling at each other’s clothes — buttons, zippers, everything that was in the way of them being as close together as they could.

Crawling and clawing on the table, they had a ravenous bout of sex. They licked and nipped and pushed and pushed and pushed. Reconciliation sex had always been the one kind that worked for them, and this morning it was particularly good. By the time they finished, they were smiling together as they kissed, laughing breathily into each other’s mouths.

Simon rolled himself off the table. As he walked away, Fleur laughed out loud. Simon turned, asking, “What?”

“You have a pancake on your ass,” she said, then curled up on the table, laughing.

~

Fleur wrenched the wheel, swinging the car over two lanes. Simon looked at her and smiled. “I appreciate you coming to the game.”

“Well,” she replied, looking straight ahead, still with something of the morning’s playful air about her, “we can’t afford to buy fossil fuel for that car of yours, so I had to drive you anyway.” She faced him with a smile. “You’re welcome. I’m glad to be coming along. I’m looking forward to seeing you play. You’re going to be great.”

“Thanks, honey. I feel a bit nervous, though.”

“About what, Simon? What could possibly be wrong with you playing the best you can?” She cocked her head as she looked at the road ahead, thinking.

The car sped past the reclaimed waterfront land that had been turned into wetlands. Simon looked out his window at the red-circle-slash-man signs spiked randomly into the marsh grass. About the same time that the wetlands were established, the city built a sewage storage tunnel. The intention was to divert human waste away from the expanded beach and boardwalk. Unfortunately, the sewage tunnel leaked, poisoning the whole area.

Simon was always glad when they cleared this part of the drive.

Fleur looked at him. “What were you worried about, anyway? Why would you hold back when you play?”

“I don’t know,” he said, looking around, at his hand, up at the roof, as if to catch the thought flying loose in the car. “I guess I don’t want to be a ball-hog, or for the guys to think that I’m showing off, that I think I’m better than them.”

“Well — pretending for a moment that you’re *not* better than them — don’t you think that everyone tends to rise to the level of the best player?”

“I guess that makes sense. Like, when one of the guys is really on, everybody catches it by the end of the night.”

“So there you go,” she said, and sped up to cross over to the off-ramp. She excited, then turned and headed north into the city. “God, look at that aquarium. A big concrete bowl stuck under that ridiculous blocky apartment building. Who in their right mind would want to live in that?”

~

Simon pulled on his rib pads. The Velcro at the side was old and refused to stay closed. He looked around for a way to keep it fastened. He spotted Del taping his last two fingers together. Simon remembered the accident two games ago when Del's pinky got broken. *That must still hurt*, he thought. "Hey, Del, can I borrow your tape?" he asked.

Del bit the tape and tore it off. "Sure." He threw the roll to Simon. "Hey, Si', is your wife coming with you to the party tonight?"

"Yeah, probably."

"Oh," said Del, wrapping the loose end of his tape tight around his fingers, not looking up for fear of catching Simon's eyes.

Simon was busy tearing off little pieces of the rough white cloth, tacking his rib pads closed with them. He twisted around to test the hold, but the pads popped open. "Del," he asked, "do you mind if I use a bunch of this? I'll bring a new roll to the next game." Del nodded, so Simon wrapped the tape around himself twice. He tested it again, and it held. "Thanks," he said, giving back the much-smaller roll of tape. There was some left; Simon wondered if he still owed Del a new roll.

Simon rocked on his feet as he reached for his shoulder pads, enjoying the spring in his new shoes. He put on his shoulder pads, then his wrist pads. He gave everything a thump to make sure it was secure, then pulled his jersey over his head. Tonight they wore their home team jersey, the blue one he liked.

"Okay," said a voice behind him, "gather 'round." Simon smiled and turned around to face the coach. He would make him proud tonight. "All right, here are the plays."

Simon's smile sank on one side. *Right, the plays. Well*, he thought as he punched on his padded gloves, *we'll think of those as 'Plan A'.*

The coach outlined the team's strategy for the evening, highlighting what they knew of their opponents. One of their defence men, Gil Grant, was a dangerous player, the coach warned. He was facing assault charges for an incident outside a game in which a lacrosse stick, or 'crosse', had been implicated as a "lethal weapon".

The coach wound down his speech, and one of the players piped up, "Hey, Earl, is it true that there's someone in the crowd who's thinking about buying the franchise?"

They all turned to look at him. It was Billy, one of their attackmen. The coach's face registered his surprise. "Where'd you hear about that?" he asked Billy.

"I'm related to someone who knows someone on the board. So is it true?"

"Yeah, it's true. I wasn't going to mention it, 'cause I didn't want to put any more pressure on the team. This is already an important game, and to put business concerns on your minds, too... But since you know, there's another reason to play the best game you can tonight."

Simon grinned. *Another reason.*

~

The team ran one by one onto the field from the wide zamboni entrance as their names echoed down from the speakers. The Toronto Maple Leafs hadn't played hockey in Maple Leaf Gardens for almost thirty years. Still, no one had even considered changing the name to Toronto Rock Gardens. The fact that the lacrosse team had gone out of business twice probably had something to do with it.

The announcer called Simon's name and he ran out. Spotlights danced around him. The crowd cheered. He liked that the team had a following, that the fans knew who he was. Looking around the rink, Simon guessed they had a sell-out crowd or close to it. That meant 15,000 people. He reached his place in line, turned and stopped. His heart revved in a high gear. He stood balanced on a line between feelings: when he thought about the importance of the game, fear spread through him like a radioactive injection. But when he thought about the game itself, that he was here to play lacrosse, he felt a simple, excited thrill in his gut, waiting for the chance to take the brakes off.

The team's cheerleaders, the Rockettes, ran and tumbled onto the field. They looked young and nubile from the stands, but some had been known to give a fright close up. Some of them were new, though, still fresh with enthusiasm about the games and, occasionally, the players.

The visiting team finished forming their line-up, then a women's barbershop chorus filed onto the field. They were something of a standard at the games. Occasionally the organisers found a young star from one of the musicals in town who'd actually heard of the sport and would agree to sing. The rest of the time they'd get the barbershoppers.

Some of the chorus members were around Simon's age. Others were older. There was one — shuffling now onto the field — who the team referred to as "Mrs. Neanderthal" or "Eve". The women wore cobalt sequinned tops that glittered under the spotlights, disco ball eveningwear versions of the team jersey. The chorus leader, who had hair like white cotton candy and a build like a quarterback, stood in front of them. She blew into a small silver disc — a pitch-pipe, too faint to be heard in the stands — put it into her pocket, and raised her hands. As she lowered them, the women opened their mouths big and wide, and let out waves of sound, renditions of both the American and Canadian national anthems that were harmonically complicated, but beautiful.

~

Simon watched the game from the players' box. He'd been put far down in the rotation tonight. The ball went into play, and both sides made some aggressive early moves. The game had barely begun, and his team-mate Billy shot the ball into the goal. Then, moments later, Nick repeated the move. The crowd cheered. The temptation was to think this would be easy, but all the players knew full well how many times a game turned around. They still had a long night ahead.

Simon's turn came, and he was substituted in. He ran around but didn't get anywhere; the ball just didn't come near him. Before he knew it, he found himself trading off, taking his position in the box again.

Like a mirror image of Toronto's earlier moves, the opposing team from Albany got one goal, then another. The rest of the period, Simon's team struggled to get a foothold, but spent most of its time on the defence. The men slashed at the ball and at each other with their crosses, which looked like broomsticks with athletic supporters on the end.

Albany's men didn't make any successful goals against Simon's team, for which he was glad. His team-mates, though, were making mistakes. John held possession of the ball too long, then Rich got a penalty for being "offsides".

Thankfully, the period ran out, and the men poured back into the box, most of them looking sheepish, knowing what the coach was about to tell them.

"*Holding*, John, what was that? And *offsides*? C'mon guys, you're better than that. You shouldn't be making those kinds of mistakes." He stopped himself and took a

moment with his face behind his hand to gather his thoughts. One thing the men appreciated in him was his insistence on coaching, not complaining. "Okay, okay. That was a lacklustre period, but now we're clear of it. Use this next one to really go wild. You guys are good at this. Hell, you won the national league championship last year. So go out there and be that team."

The next period started with Simon in the box again, watching the face-off. He gently slid himself over by the coach and said to him, "Let me on."

"Not just yet, Simon. I don't want you tired when I need you."

Okay, figured Simon, he could deal with that answer.

The Rock players were being aggressive, blocking shots and running hard to move the ball down the field. But no goals. Simon took a drink of salty-sugary lemonade from a bottle with the sponsor's logo on it. Not that he particularly liked it or needed to cash in on its claim of restoring electrolyte balance (whatever that would do for him), he just drank it for something to do while he waited. And it was free; the team didn't get a whole lot of free stuff. He even had to pay for his jersey, he considered, straightening it out over his padding. He liked it, though, this shiny cobalt shirt with its big maple leaf. In the middle of the leaf, though, was their embarrassing logo, the CN Tower leaning over, wailing on a guitar. Two years ago, one of the building's glass observation floor panels fell to the ground below, giving a fatal ride to the tourist who stood on it. Suddenly the claim of being the fifth tallest freestanding structure was no longer such an asset. The team had a game the following evening, and felt very uncomfortable running onto the field with the guitar-wielding killer building stitched on their chests.

Simon turned around to look for Fleur in the stands, when he heard a weak cheer from the crowd. He looked back at the rink to see a clump of Albany fans celebrating their goal. He looked to his coach, who wore an expression on his face like his tie was shrinking. But the coach withheld judgment. "Lots of time left," he said to no one.

Billy ran over to the substitution area, and Simon leapt up to take his place on the field. The players gave each other a thump on the back as they passed. In an instant, Simon found himself in the middle of a mess of sticks and bodies. He twisted and dodged, then saw an opening. As he ran into Albany's goal area, he 'cradled' his stick, twisting it back and forth to keep the ball in the net. Nope, he realised, dodging while one of Albany players whacked at his chest with a stick, there was no way he was going to be able to take a shot. But Nick was in the clear. Simon passed the ball to him with a flick of his wrist. Nick caught it and ran headlong for the crease, faking a shot to make the goalie react, then shooting it to the opposite side of the net for another goal.

As the teams jogged back to their positions for the face-off, Simon gave Nick a high-five, though the move was never quite right with the heavy padded gloves on.

Three-three, thought Simon, taking his position opposite an Albany player, who turned out to be the violent Grant they'd been warned about. Simon smirked at Grant as they faced each other. Things were warming up now, he could feel it.

Breaking away from the face-off, Mark came toward him and passed him the ball. Grant stuck to Simon, making sure his stick was as much in his face as the rules would allow. Still, Simon made some ground toward the Albany goal. Grant chopped hard at Simon's stick with his own, then hacked at his chest. Simon started to get angry. *That's just what he wants*, Simon figured, *to get me flustered*. As he moved, he took a deep breath to clear his head.

His body instinctively turned him around, running for a few paces away from the Albany goal. Grant followed, still stick-whacking him. The ball fell to the ground, and as Grant stooped to pick it up, Simon rolled over of Grant's back. As he landed on

the other side of the man, he swept the ball away from him. Still low to the ground, Grant swung his stick at Simon's legs. Simon flipped himself over the stick, landed, and took a clear shot at the goal. The goalie was too busy watching Simon move, and reacted too late.

"Yes!" said Simon, flipping his crosse around his arm like a majorette's baton. He passed Grant on his way to the midfield and smiled at him. Grant did not smile in return.

Simon crouched down to put his stick on the ground for the face-off, his legs straight. He faced the Albany player and arched an eyebrow as the referee placed the ball between their sticks and blew his whistle. They both lunged for the ball, but Simon's reflexes were quicker.

Simon ran down the field, moving around the Albany players as if they were stationary pinball bumpers. He checked left and right to see if there was anyone to pass to. Samir and Kenny were nearby, but passing meant the possibility that someone would intercept the ball.

It's not that it's too easy, thought Simon; the other team put up a real opposition. But somehow he could always outmanoeuvre them, always knew just where to bend and leap. In an instant, he faced the goal again. He cradled his stick back and forth. The goalie was ready for him this time, standing square in the front of the net, his oversized padding stuck under his jersey, looking like side panels from a car. Simon was larger than normal in his padding, too, much like a football player, but only from the waist up: the lacrosse uniform bottom consisted of loose basketball-type shorts and sneakers. All in all, their uniform looked as if it were made up of leftovers from other sports. The goalies, though, were unusually large in their getups, but this was of necessity when a two-and-a-half pound hard rubber ball was in play.

The only way to get the ball past the goalie was to sneak it in. So Simon headed away from the net, conscious that he'd been holding the ball for a while and was about to run out of time. He turned, faked a move to the left, then ran to the right, catapulting the ball full-force back over his left shoulder without looking. It bounced off the floor, which despite its fake grass covering was still hard, and the ball angled up into the net.

Five-three.

Simon ran to the substitution area to be replaced by another player. The coach gave Simon a pat on the back as he took his place on the bench and took off his helmet.

Play continued, each of the teams raging back and forth, taking shots and being blocked, gaining possession and losing it. The play grew rough, and some of the players were punch-drunk. Billy ran into the substitution area.

"I want to go on," said Simon to the coach.

"You sure you're not tired?" he asked.

"No," said Simon, "I feel great." The coach shrugged, and gestured him on.

John, one of the defencemen, ran after an Albany player who'd made it to their end. He forced the player behind the goal, and wrested the ball from his possession with a series of vicious but legal body-checks into the boards. He scooped the ball away and ran to the midfield. Both Simon and Nick were there to receive him. John looked back and forth between them.

Nick raised his crosse, and started running, ready to catch the ball. "You hang back," he said to Simon, who ran alongside him. Nick's position as captain had been a point of animosity between them before.

But Simon didn't give in. "No," he said, keeping pace as Nick reached for the pass from John. The pass went high, though, and Nick ran full-tilt to try to catch up

with it. It passed over the end of his net, just as one of the Albanians flew in to smash him against the boards.

Personal foul, thought Simon, but he still had a chance to take a shot on the goal before the penalty was called. He reached the ball at the same time as an Albany man, their crosses smashing together as they wrestled for the ball. With a deft twist, Simon took possession. As he turned back and forth to avoid the other player's attacks, he spotted the timer overhead: five seconds left in the period. Then he glanced toward the Albany goal. Grant was there, in the way.

"You better move!" yelled Simon to Grant, and arced his stick forward with one arm, hurling the ball with all his strength. Simon saw Grant's eyes flare open inside his mask. Grant threw himself to the ground as the ball raced past him and pounded into the goalie's arm, deflecting into the net.

A siren wailed overhead and the crowd filled the arena with a giant cheer. Air horns blasted in the stands.

The Albany goalie held his arm and slunk to the ground as his coach and a medical official approached him. Simon ran over, crouched down next to the player, and took off his mask. "Hey, I'm sorry about that."

"That's okay," said the goalie through clenched teeth. "Good shot."

Simon stood to return to his team's box as the announcer's voice echoed overhead, "Toronto goal at 14:56, scored by Simon 'Willpower' Williams, and clocked at one hundred and fifteen miles per hour." Simon raised his eyebrows at the mention of his shot's speed, then laughed to himself at the nickname — for some reason the organisers felt the need to give each of them a 'handle'. But no one on the team used the stupid names, and he'd never heard a fan use them, either.

Grant stood in Simon's way, scowling. Simon nodded to him and tried to pass, but Grant poked a thick, gloved finger in Simon's chest.

"Yeah?" asked Simon.

But Grant couldn't think of anything to say. So he gave Simon another poke.

"Uh-huh, got it, thanks," said Simon. He felt bad for hurting the goalie, but that was one of the acceptable risks of the game. It was nothing personal.

~

The Rockettes ran onto the field, clad in their skin-tight red tops and black trousers, clapping their hands. Music with a pounding beat fell from the speakers above. The cheerleaders pumped their arms and made choreographed foot movements.

Fleur rolled her eyes as the man in the seat next to her hooted at the women. *As if he'd ever stand a chance with one of them*, she thought. He sported a round beer belly which obscured whatever he might have had in his lap. Next to him, his son, who Fleur figured was in his late single digits, cheered too, then whistled between his fingers. *Great*, she thought, *teach him to be a pig from the get-go*. The boy took off his jersey, exposing his physique, all ribs and white, and whirled the shirt over his head. This tradition was over twenty years old, she once heard, though nobody knew what it was supposed to signify. She just hoped that the boy's dad wouldn't catch the fever. If he did, she would wait out the rest of the game in the car.

~

Earl, their coach, cheered the team on as they entered the dressing room. That meant a lot more to the guys than the girls' rented enthusiasm back on the field (where they now formed a conga line, then cartwheeled sideways out of it). His support, though, contained an observable amount of caution: the game's outcome, they knew too well,

couldn't be guessed. He addressed them like a buddy who happened to be an amateur philosopher, whereas their previous coach more closely resembled a perpetually startled and angry bear, and led through fear and intimidation.

Earl talked to them at length about using the opponent's strength against him, and concluded with a passage from the *Tao Te Ching*. The men looked confused.

Rich put up his hand. The coach nodded to him. "So what do you want us to do this period?"

The coach sighed. "More of the same. But—" he made a gesture like clawing something from his gut, "but more."

He faced more puzzled looks.

"Give 'em hell!"

The team hollered and cheered, jumping from the benches and heading out to the rink. The coach slumped down in his seat, defeated by having to resort to World War II bomber-captain-speak.

"Simon, c'mere," he said. Simon stopped and turned around as the others left.

"That was some nice work out there. Just one thing: don't get the other guys upset. They won't play well." He stood, walked over to Simon, and put a hand on his shoulder. "But don't hold yourself back, either. 'Cause, honestly, you're like nothing I've ever seen. Just find a way to take the others along with you."

Simon nodded, pursing his lips, silently pondering the point. The coach gave him a shove toward the field. Simon smiled and ran out into the lights.

~

Kenny, Samir, and Nick formed a triangle in front of Albany's goal, passing the ball back and forth. It looked like they were stuck in an endless pattern, but Nick popped the ball into the net, just as Grant leapt in to make an illegal slash at him. A horn went off overhead, music blared, and the crowd cheered.

Grant chuckled as he walked by Nick: the referee hadn't seen his dirty move. Annoyed, Nick tilted his stick towards the ground, and without really intending to, caught the end of Grant's sneaker in his net, tripping him to the ground. Grant picked himself up instantly and threw himself into Nick, but the referee intervened before the tension escalated into a fight. With a touch to his belt, he announced a penalty over the speakers, Nick's, two minutes for unsportsmanlike conduct. Nick argued all the way to the box.

Albany took advantage of the missing player, scoring a series of quick goals. One of the other midfielders traded off, and Simon went on and off several times. The period flew by with no openings, no magical holes in the defence to run through. Albany slowly crawled up to a tie, then broke away with a flurry of rabid solo attacks on Toronto's goalie. Three-quarters of the way through the period, Albany had ten goals to Toronto's seven.

The coach knew that this was the moment to call a time-out. At times like these, the game felt like riding a broken bicycle down a very steep hill. If the players could just catch their breath, there might still be a chance to recover. He gestured for them to gather around him. "Don't let them get under your skin," he told the men. They were hurt, so they were listening, listening hard for anything he could give them. "Try to see what their intention is. Don't play where they are or where you want them to be; play where they're going, where they want to go."

He clapped his hands together and rubbed them brusquely, put a foot up on the bench and leaned on his knee. "Okay, here's the plan for the rest of the period: blow it off."

The players looked more confused than ever.

"I mean it. Don't go for anything. Just run around. But don't let them get anywhere. Just stick to them like flypaper and drive them nuts. You'll break the pattern of this game, and totally confuse that team." He stood up. "I'm going to the can. You won't see me until the next period starts."

He started to walk away, then turned back. "Oh, and next period, you are to go totally berserk. Play clean and play your positions and all that, but don't let that get in your way. Play lacrosse like you were never going to get to play it again. Win it, that's all."

The time-out ended, and the men were left to sort themselves out. Some headed back to the field and some to the bench. Somehow Earl had broken through their heavy mood.

Simon smiled to himself as he ran onto the field, admiring the coach anew. He leapt into position and stared down the player opposite him. When the ball was in play, he jumped in the way of his man, heading him off in whatever direction he faced until he heard the man grunting with aggravation. All around him, the others took similar tactics, annoying their chosen Albanian until the clock ran out.

They laughed as they left the field for the brief break between periods. This was fun again, and they saw how much they could affect the other team without really even playing.

~

The starting line-up in the fourth period couldn't stop a triangle of Albany players from gathering in front of their net. The formation brought a quick goal that threatened to unsettle the Toronto team. When a substitution came, Simon jumped onto the field with a hoot and took his position for the face-off.

He aggressively slapped his stick to the ground and balanced on his toes. He turned and smiled to Billy on his left, then to Mark on his right. He faced the other player, gently bumping the player's shoulder pads a couple of times with his own. The move suggested that he was going to steamroll the man as soon as he got a chance.

When the whistle blew, though, instead of hunkering in to wrestle for the ball, Simon simply stepped back. The other player lurched forward, surprised, and Simon easily scooped the ball away. The other man got up and lunged toward Simon, but Simon had already passed the ball off to Billy, who ran down the field.

Simon sprinted to catch up. He ran past players from both teams, waving his own men back to cover him. Billy got close to the net, but a trio was there to catch him. Just before getting plowed into the boards, he threw the ball to Simon. Simon looked at it arc through the air: the pass was high, very high.

He took three long steps and jumped straight into the air. His legs kept moving as he reached an impossible height and swung his stick two-handed from behind his head to make contact with the solid rubber ball. The momentum of his swing sent the ball shooting straight down into the net. The sirens blew overhead and the crowd roared as Simon landed in a squat, his stick out between his hands on the ground to balance him. He laughed out loud. Batting the ball was rare, but legal. And it worked.

As if inspired by their wild playing, one of the Albany players made a mad dash from the face-off towards Toronto's crease, but John was there to stop him with several swashbuckling attacks with his stick and a body check that unsettled the ball from the player's stick. John stole it away and headed away toward the opposite side of the field. Simon stayed behind, blocking players so John would get his chance. It was rare for John to play attack like that, and the Toronto players cheered him on as he ran. They knew he wasn't breakaway material and would probably hand the ball off when he got close, so they put themselves in several positions to receive him. But the

other team saw that, and formed an opposition in each spot. So John found himself forced to keep going further and further into Albany's goal area, until he was at the net. Sticks chopped and flew at him, then Grant checked him from the side. As he fell, he took a shot on the goal. The referee had to take a look at it, and there was some argument, but he ruled that it had, in fact, crossed the perimeter of the net.

The team jumped around John and gave him a friendly clobbering with their gloves and sticks as he substituted himself off the field.

Simon stole a glance at the scoreboard above: eleven-nine for Albany. *Okay, he thought, let's get to work.*

From the face-off, Mark passed the ball to Simon. An Albany man decided to stop him, but Simon persistently presented his back, limiting the other player's moves: legally, the man could only attack him from the front. Simon laughed to himself as he remembered his confrontation in the kitchen with Fleur the day before. *This guy is a kitten compared to her*, he thought, passing the ball across the width of the field to Nick. Nick and Samir played catch down the field, and with a clever fake, Samir sped the ball into the goal, bringing the score to eleven-ten.

As Samir left the field, he looked to Simon. "You okay to stay on?"

"Oh yeah!" said Simon, giving him a fat thumbs-up with his glove, smiling, as he walked to the centre line for the face-off.

Again, Simon moved too quickly for the other player and took possession of the ball. He ran easily to the Albany goal area, twisting, dodging, feeling where the other men were going, and managing to fit into another space in-between. He faked passes to the other players, changed direction three times, and found himself just yards from the goal — where Grant waited for him.

Simon ran with as much force as he could, but Grant stepped in to meet him with equal strength. Just as they met, Grant held his hands straight out, braced wide on his stick to use it like a wooden bumper. The move was crosse-checking, illegal, but no one would see it. Their sticks met, and Simon's ageing wooden stick cracked from the impact as it plowed into Simon's chest. Both men heard it crack, but knew that while Grant's crosse-check was illegal, so was playing without a stick. Simon, falling over Grant's shoulder, pulled the ball from his net and threw it into the air. As his leg came over, he kicked hard, catching the ball in mid-air and sending it into the net.

The scoreboard blazed with light, horns went off, and a rock song drummed off the walls. "Tie game," yelled Simon over the noise, "all perfectly legal." He shrugged at Grant with the two pieces of wood in his hands, walking backwards toward his end.

The Albany coach called a time out for his team.

"You all right?" Simon's coach asked him as he approached their bench.

"Never better," he said with a smile, pulling off his helmet. "But I could use another crosse."

Billy handed him his, a pricey graphite number. Simon started to object, but Billy pulled his glove off and put up a hand to silence him. "You play for me. You go, man."

Simon smiled and patted him on the back. He took his seat, and downed some more of the salty lemonade. *Now it tastes good*, he thought. *Well, it tastes useful.*

The time-out clock ran down to zero, and the players piled back onto the field.

Mark played the face-off, but was quickly forced to hand the ball off to Nick. Simon trailed behind him as he approached the goalie. But at the last minute Nick looked to him, then gave up a perfectly clear shot to pass the ball to Simon. "Win it!" he yelled.

Simon was about to take the shot, but Grant threw himself to the ground in front of Simon's next step. It didn't matter if the move was an accident or if he risked a penalty to stop the goal — Simon had just an instant to respond. He crouched at the

end of his step and sprung, flipping forward over the man with his stick clutched to his chest. He landed on two feet immediately in front of the crease, then fired off a shot. The ball flew in, bouncing off the goalie's helmet, into the string of the net.

The fans in the stands rose to their feet, clapping and cheering. Simon raised his arms and made a big victory scream as his team-mates ran to join him.

Grant stood up and spun around, stabbing his stick with both hands into Simon's side. The blow tore open the tape holding Simon's padding together, and the end of the crosse drove into his ribs. Simon's cheer stopped and his arms dropped, his face crunched into a wince, and he fell to the ground. When his side hit the floor of the rink, he saw one last glimpse of the flashing lights in the arena, then blacked out.

~

"He's awake!" yelled Fleur.

Simon looked around to find himself in a little 'room' defined by a blue curtain. He was on top of a hospital bed, still in his lacrosse shorts, but without his jersey. He groaned in pain and gritted his teeth together.

"Hel-lo!" bellowed Fleur to the hospital in general. She pulled the curtain aside, and screamed at a passing nurse. "My husband is injured, could someone please help us?"

"I'm sorry," said the woman, "but we're understaffed, and it's a very busy evening."

"Normally," said Fleur, calming her tone, which Simon knew meant that she was sharpening her words, "I would appreciate that. But right now, I don't care if the mother of every doctor in the province is having an aneurysm. I want my husband to get the medical care he deserves."

"All right," said the nurse, knowing from her experience that the only way to shut people like Fleur up was to just give them whatever they wanted. "What's the matter?"

"I think his ribs are broken."

"Hello?" the nurse said to Simon. "Are you awake?" Simon gave an affirmative grunt. "Okay. I want to give you some kind of painkiller. But I need to know if you have any allergies." Simon shook his head. "Any previous medical conditions?" He shook his head. "Do you have your health card with you?" He made a sound she couldn't decipher. "Pardon me?"

Simon cleared his throat, and spoke between clenched teeth. "I've never been to a hospital before."

"Oh," said the nurse, "well, do you have a family doctor?"

"No. I've never been sick."

The nurse looked puzzled, and gave a little laugh. "You mean you've never been injured before?"

"No," said Simon, flinching from the pain in his side, "I've never been sick."

"What?" asked the nurse. "No colds, no flus, no broken bones?"

"Until now," he answered.

"But—?" she started, then stopped. If what he said was true, it was remarkable. He seemed sincere, but then, lots of men were stupidly heroic about not getting appropriate care. She took out a tray from a side cart. "If you've never registered for a health card, we'll have to get a DNA sample."

"Why?" asked Fleur.

"When the hospital submits a claim, it has to be accompanied by some proof of the patient's identity. Otherwise we have to eat the cost, and we can't afford to do

that. Provincial health cards take months for the government to process. A DNA scan is the only way we can assure right away that the patient's ID is unique."

"But what if you find something?" said Fleur, panicked. "If you find some kind of disease, we won't be able to get insurance, or—"

"Mrs—?"

"Williams."

"Mrs. Williams, this information is not given to anyone outside the hospital system. It's not legal for us to do anything with this information other than verify the identity of patients and assist in criminal investigations. Let me put it another way: if you do this, your husband's treatment will be paid for. If you don't, you either have to get a provincial health card or pay for the treatment yourself."

"Okay, okay," said Fleur. "Do it. Just help him."

The nurse took a syringe and rubber tube from the tray, and prepared to take the sample.

Chapter 8

From the balcony of the bar, Hugh looked out at the city of Cartago. Some of the roofs were traditional, with tiles like big bamboo stalks made of red clay. Above them rose modern office and apartment buildings shaped like air conditioners. Behind the city lay a backdrop of mountains, piles of raw earth, seemingly piled-up leftovers from the building of the city, or the raw material for another one. Behind the mountains rose a seamless curtain of perfect blue sky.

The weather had been good for their trip to the city. Ed left again to see if Doctor Rudiger, the object of their trip, had arrived. Hugh stayed behind to watch their drinks. Funny, thought Hugh, that a trip to the city seemed fun now, when just weeks before he'd been so content to reach the natural retreat of the camp. He wondered whether he was a city person or a country person. *Or maybe, he considered, it's just impossible for a human being to be content indefinitely with any one thing.*

The others would arrive later. The doctor needed to be picked up, and this was a good chance to get some supplies, too. But more than that, it was also an excuse to goof off for a night in the city. None of them said that, but it was implicit when they all agreed to go. Except Federico, of course, who wouldn't leave the compound unattended. They were grateful for his sense of duty: the buildings should be safeguarded from break-ins or whatever else Federico imagined happening. They were also happy to leave him behind.

Hugh heard a glass fall to the floor behind him. He turned quickly to see a small man fumbling to mop up the spill on the floor beside his table. A waitress rushed in to help him. *Poor little guy is soused*, thought Hugh, then turned back his own drink and took a sip.

He turned slowly around to look at the man again. He was middle-aged and white, not all that unusual in Cartago. But there was something else. Something about him was familiar. Hugh reached back into his memory. Sorting through memories without a starting place was tricky. But somehow this stranger was attached to something in there, he knew it.

The zoo.

Hugh closed his eyes and walked himself back through that day, working gradually up to his trip to the zoo. He'd just found Oswald and Ted (*I owe them a letter*, he thought), and was walking toward the panda exhibit.

There, passing by in a flash, was the little man in a long, green parka. Hugh hadn't seen his face square-on, so he had no recollection of it. But as he looked at the man across the bar, Hugh grew sure that it was the same person. Something about the shape of the head, the way he moved. He was never wrong about these things.

Hugh picked up his drink and walked to the bar. His and Ed's coats were still at the table, so Ed's drink was safe from waitress zeal, Hugh figured. He asked the waitress working behind the bar what the man was drinking, and asked for one of those. Amazed at his own audacity, he went over to the man and stood across the table from him. Hugh wasn't sure what he was doing, but it was something bold, and his heart raced.

"It's always a shame to see one fall in battle like that," said Hugh, holding forward the fresh drink, smiling. He wasn't a real drinker, but making "alcohol is cool" remarks to a drunk man seemed pretty safe.

The man looked up, surprised, and smiled as he saw the drink. He took it gently from Hugh's hands.

"Mind if I sit down?" asked Hugh.

"Um, no," said the man, sitting up in his seat.

It wouldn't do to confront him directly. "So when did you arrive in Cartago?" asked Hugh.

"Huh?"

"You don't look like you're from here. White guy, no suntan. You know."

"Oh," said the man, laughing, "five days."

"Are you here for work?" asked Hugh, then realised that cornering the man with questions might make him clam up. Better to offer something up himself. "That's why I'm here, work."

"Yeah, I'm here with work. But it's not going very well."

"Sorry to hear it. Wish I could help you."

"Well," the man began with a plaintive sigh. He leaned an arm lazily on the table, dropped his chin on his hand, and spoke through the half of his mouth left uncovered, "If you find any secret genetics laboratories in the mountains, let me know."

Hugh took a sip of his drink to cover his shock. His eyebrows wanted to climb into his hair. "Hah," he laughed. He took another drink. "I wouldn't know anything about that. I'm just a legal assistant. So, do you just want a lab in general, or is this a particular one you're looking for?"

The man's brow squished down. "Just one. Out there somewhere. I've gotten some farmers to talk to me. He's paying them to raise animals for him."

Hugh looked away, checking for Ed. "He?"

"Rudiger."

Man, thought Hugh in the man's direction, *you're terrible at this*. He suddenly had a new appreciation for how well he'd kept his secret all these weeks. *This guy doesn't care who knows his business*. "Let me guess, this Rudiger is in charge of the laboratory."

"Yup."

"And when you do find him," said Hugh — the man harrumphed his doubt that he ever would — "what are you going to do? Are you supposed to work for him or something?"

"God, no," said the man, straightening up in his seat again. He pulled his summer sportscoat open slightly to show the handle of a strange, blocky gun.

"You're going to kill him?!" said Hugh, leaning close, making an effort to keep his voice low.

"No, no. I don't kill people. People are hard to kill, and they always end up testifying against you. No, I'm an animal assassin."

Hugh's first instinct was to laugh, except that this finished the connection in his head: not only had the man been at the zoo, he'd nearly blown Hugh up. "Is there much of a market for killing animals?" he asked.

"There is now," said the man, "thanks to this Rudiger fella."

Hugh had had enough of this game. "My name's Hugh, I—"

"Frank Hardt," said the man before Hugh had a chance to finish. He extended a hand which Hugh shook. Hardt dropped his hand back down on the table, then brought his other up to cross it over the resting one. It was bandaged, wrapped carelessly with gauze.

"What happened to your hand?" asked Hugh.

"I got bitten by a sheep."

"Oh," said Hugh, unsure of the proper response to such a statement, "I'm sorry."

"So's the sheep," said the man. He snickered to himself, shaking loose a strand of hair. He reached up and patted it back with the rest. His hair was dyed black, parted far down the left side just over his ear, and shaped in a perfect, thick crest over his head. His hand continued patting, checking in with his hair, making sure it hadn't betrayed him somehow. "Crazy things ate a schoolteacher. Can you imagine what that would be like?"

"Look, Mr. Hardt, I know why you're here. Nadine hired me, too. But she didn't tell me anything about you. So what's she got planned? Blowing the whole thing up? That's what you do, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry," he said, "I don't know who this Nadine is." A wave of clarity hit the man. His eyes, agates floating in milk, came back into focus as they zeroed in on Hugh's face. "You know what I'm talking about, don't you? You know about this lab. Where is it?"

Hugh spotted Ed coming into the bar with someone in tow, a man in his mid-fifties, nearly bald, wearing a dark suit and thick-rimmed glasses. His overcoat was too heavy for the weather here, and he seemed to be a little short of breath. It had to be Rudiger.

"Uh, no," said Hugh, quickly, "I have no idea what you're talking about." He tried to wave to the waitress, thinking he'd drown the man in a couple of free drinks. But the waitress wasn't paying attention. "I've gotta run. Sorry about the misunderstanding. I hope you find what you're looking for."

He jumped from the table and in a single move crossed the room to fetch his and Ed's coats, then met Ed and Rudiger at the door. Ed smiled and started his introduction, but Hugh was busy ushering them from the bar before Hardt noticed them.

His attempt failed. The little man's gaze followed Hugh from the table, and now rested squarely on Rudiger. Hardt fumbled out of his chair and reached inside his jacket. "Hey!" he yelled.

"Come on!" insisted Hugh, pushing, "Get out!" Confused, the other two men obeyed his command. As he ducked through the door, Hugh saw the man waving his gun in their direction. Its handle was a small metal block, its barrel a long tube with holes bored out of its sides. It looked hand-tooled, Hugh thought, and God knew what kind of damage it was intended to do.

They ran down the stairs, hearing the waitress scream behind them.

"Who the hell is that?" asked Ed as they emerged out onto the street.

"Someone who doesn't like our work," replied Hugh, scanning the street.

"Where's the car?"

"This way," said Ed, taking the lead.

Rudiger gasped as they ran. "How — does he know? You — didn't—?"

"No," interjected Hugh, "he already knew about it."

Hardt came out of the hotel, looking around wildly, and spotted them. "Hey!" he called again. He ran a few paces, and took aim with his gun. Hugh spotted him over his shoulder, but reasoned that Hardt wouldn't shoot. If he killed them, he'd never find what he was looking for.

A small trail of smoke instantly drew a line from the gun to the car beside them. The car jumped five feet onto the sidewalk and its sides blew apart, erupting in flames. The explosion knocked the men to the ground with bruising force. When they regained their wits, Ed and Hugh got up, ready to run. Rudiger, though, remained on the ground. Hugh stole a look at Hardt, who wobbled in their direction, swinging his gun around, peering over it to get a bead on them. People ran about the square, yelling, blocking his way. Hugh marvelled at the man's carelessness; surely the authorities would come around soon, and there was a crowd of witnesses. Hardt was lost in the melee.

"What are you doing?" asked Ed, pulling at Rudiger's arm.

"I dropped my inhaler," he said, scuttling around the ground, his voice catching on the wheeze in his throat.

"We'll get another one," said Hugh. "Come on!"

"No," said Ed, "it's a special one, not just for asthma. He needs it to live."

"Oh," said Hugh, joining Ed as he moved to the ground.

"Got it!" said Rudiger, crawling behind a car to sit. Ed sat next to him while Hugh hunkered down, popping up occasionally to check on the little assassin, who was nowhere to be seen. Rudiger uncapped both ends of what looked like a matte silver kazoo, then took a small glass vial from his pocket and attached it to the top. He breathed deep, sucking air hungrily through the makeshift pipe. The more breaths he took, the calmer he grew.

There was something strange about the effect, thought Hugh. When he was clambering around, Rudiger looked like a bumbling comedian. But now there was a certain gravity about him as he sat, pocketing his strange apparatus, then straightening his shirtcuffs and tie.

"Let's go," said Rudiger, standing and brushing himself off, completely unconcerned. He exuded an authority that Hugh and Ed gave into, despite their fear. The doctor strolled easily across the square. "Where is the car?" he asked Ed. Ed pointed quickly down a small street, and Rudiger led them in that direction.

~

There would be no partying in town tonight. The two teams met at the appointed time, just long enough for Rudiger to inform them that they were to return to the compound that evening. He had "concerns", he said. He quickly rhymed off a long list of items for each of them to buy, and instructed everyone to head home as soon as they'd bought all their items.

Hugh had a new appreciation for the carefree way they'd been organising their days until now, and wondered if the good times were over. He and Ed left Rudiger in the car, puffing on his apparatus. The town was now decked out in neon and strings of incandescent bulbs, a nice night to sit on a patio drinking cervezas and listen to music. But they had work to do.

~

"What's wrong with these people?" asked Hugh, wandering through the abandoned schoolhouse that served as a public health centre.

"It seems to be some kind of meningitis," said Rionna, unwrapping another vial and puncturing its metal end on the jet syringe. A tired-looking mother held her daughter as Rionna swabbed the girl's arm. The girl shrank away from her. "No, no," said Rionna to the girl, "this needle doesn't hurt." With a slight hiss, the needle sent the fluid into the girl's arm. Her small face beamed up at Rionna, surprised that there was no pain. Rionna gave her a brightly-coloured sweet and moved on.

"What a shame," she said, "1980's technology, and they haven't seen it. And you know, Doctor Rudiger pays for this clinic out of his own pocket. The state won't recognise that there's a health problem."

Hugh looked around at the people in the small, whitewashed room, all locals from along the river. "So who first discovered this problem?"

"Doctor Rudiger. And when he proposed providing a vaccine, the state just let him go ahead. These people don't officially exist," said Rionna.

A man and woman sat waiting for their turn. She wore a bright yellow woven shirt, and held the hand of her husband, who was thin and had a small beard with a few grey hairs. They held hands tightly. Hugh went over to them and tried to reassure them, saying that they would help them. The woman asked if it was true what the doctor said, that if they didn't get the shot they would die.

"Oh God," said Rionna, patting Hugh on the shoulder before he could answer the couple, "it's that new health nurse." A woman in a white nun's habit hung her

raincoat on the long row of child-height hooks at the building's entrance. "She's just a nun and doesn't know the first thing about medicine. She just showed up, saying that the state wanted her here, like all of the sudden they cared about these people."

The woman turned around to face them, and Hugh gasped: *Nadine*. She smiled her most beatific, innocent smile, and approached them. After a brief set of introductions, she launched into business. "So this is the third round of shots for these people, is it?" she asked Rionna, who nodded. "Do you have a sample for of the vaccine that's being administered today?"

"Yes," said Rionna, "though you realise that what you're taking means that there's less to go around?"

Nadine gave her a most un-nunlike look. "I'm sure they'll get by," she quipped.

"Rionna, you keep going, I'll stay and talk to the sister here." Rionna agreed, more than happy to take leave of her.

Hugh couldn't help laughing. "This is cute," said Hugh, flipping the corner of her white frock. Maybe he was being too familiar with her. She was still his ersatz boss, but it was easy to blame her for his having to live out this awkward pretence. The white band of her headpiece looked too tight against her still-healing scratches and bug-bites. Still, he envied her distance, her not having to be duplicitous.

"Hugh, what is this setup here? What is going on?"

"They're supposed to be treating these folks for some kind of meningitis."

Nadine held up the vial. "He's *giving* them meningitis. An inert form, so it would look like it was already there and he'd beaten it. But there's something else in here, some kind of invasive gene therapy that's piggybacking on the vaccine."

"And you can't tell what it's designed to do?"

"No, we're stumped," she said. "Nobody but Rudiger has that kind of equipment."

Hugh saw Rionna give shots in turn to the man then the woman whom he'd been consoling earlier. Guilt washed through him; this was his worst betrayal yet.

Then he remembered the animal assassin. "I met this man, Frank Hardt, in town, who's looking for the compound," he said. "He's crazy; he tried to kill us. But he didn't know who you were. I need to hear from you that it's true."

Nadine looked worried, as if thinking about something far away. "No, I don't know him. Did he say who hired him?"

"No."

"Hugh, I'm concerned about our schedule. We might be taking too long here."

"According to whom? I thought I was working for you."

"And you are," she said, pocketing the vial, remembering to look like she was having an official conversation with a stranger. "But I think my main investor is getting impatient. I'm concerned that she might be taking other measures in case we're not successful here."

"So 'she' hired this Hardt freak to blow it all up?"

Nadine grimaced apologetically. "Um, looks like it."

"Great," he said, leaving her.

~

Rudiger rushed from his house, still talking on his phone. He stopped talking to it in his hand and held it to his ear for privacy. Hugh was crossing the compound, but the doctor didn't acknowledge him. He kept heading for the jeeps. "*All* of them?" he yelled. "Yes, I know, but those sheep — look, I don't care about your farm!" He holstered in the direction of the boathouse. "Federico!"

By the time Federico emerged to see what was going on, Rudiger was sitting in the passenger seat a jeep, puffing on his medicinal kazoo. Moments later, they bumped away down the dirt driveway.

Hugh fetched Ed and Esteban, and brought them to the lab, where Rionna and Elena were working. He told them what he'd seen. "I think," he said, "that we should take advantage of this evening and have ourselves a good time. 'Cause, you know, this season isn't going to go on forever."

The others didn't understand his sense of urgency, but they had been focusing on work without a break since the doctor returned. So they all agreed to make the most of the evening.

~

Esteban and Rionna made supper. It took longer than it should have, but then, they'd been prone to disappearing for long stretches together lately.

Hugh shared this observation with Ed, who'd noticed it, too. There'd been something about her, he said, that he noticed the night they climbed the volcano — as if she were in heat. She might have picked him, Ed, Esteban, or anyone, but it happened to be Esteban. He was a nice guy, a good choice, Hugh said, chewing on a tough piece of fish, then washing it down with a gulp of beer.

"When was the last time you were 'in heat?'" asked Ed.

Hugh smiled, having his own blunt phrase thrown back at him. He laughed and groaned at the same time, pulling his hands down his face. "I think I need another beer for this one."

Ed reached under the picnic table and produced one for him, then leaned forward attentively.

"Uh, okay." Hugh looked off at the trees, then back at Ed. "You," he said, "at the volcano." He laughed weakly. "But, you know, it was just a passing moment. I mean, I didn't think—"

"No, uh, it's cool," said Ed, sitting up in surprise, his eyebrows reflecting the swoop of his widow's peak, "Wow. I'm flattered. Thanks."

They sat in quiet, laughing awkwardly back and forth until their comfortable familiarity returned. "Actually," said Ed, "I meant, do you have anyone back home? Anyone serious?"

"Oh." Hugh stopped smiling. "No. There's really only been one person for me. And we haven't spoken for five years."

"Wow, you really don't forget anything, do you?" Ed hit him on the arm and stood up from the table. He was up for a good time, and wasn't about to let the moment turn weepy. "Come on. Let's go swimming."

~

The water was liquid copper, shimmering in the dusk. They jumped off the dock and splashed about, playing as they had when Hugh first arrived. He'd even learned to be comfortable with the other things in the water besides his friends.

He climbed out and sat on the side of the dock, kicking his feet in the water. The trees overhead rustled; the wind was picking up, but the air was still hot. It felt like a storm, but one that probably wouldn't arrive until later when they were asleep.

A monkey screeched far away, and Hugh remembered Hardt. They weren't safe here. From the sound of Rudiger's phone call, the assassin found one of the farms where Rudiger raised animals. Sooner or later he'd find the compound, too.

"Guys," he said, slipping back into the water and dog-paddling over to the others, "we should take a trip up-river tonight. You know, maybe go see the people we treated the other day."

"What about the compound?" asked Esteban.

"We can lock all the buildings," said Elena. "I'd like to see how they're getting on. It's one thing to look through a microscope, but knowing I'd helped real people would be nice."

"Ed?" asked Hugh.

"Yeah, sure. Esteban, why don't we get the boat, and the rest of you can get out of your swim things. We should meet back here in ten minutes or so, just so we don't get back too late."

~

The boat sliced through the blue-black water. Esteban guided them down a small off-shoot from the main river. Elena held up a large battery-powered lamp to guide their way. The smoky cone of its light made constellations of small clouds of insects and comets of larger ones. Its outer edge exposed the trees along the river's edge, all colour leached from them in the faint lamplight.

A clearing appeared ahead in the trees, accompanied by a rickety wooden dock. "There," said Elena, pointing. Esteban turned the handle on the outboard motor and angled the boat toward the dock.

Ed tied a rope to it, securing the boat. One by one they stepped onto the dock, each of them practised enough to not make the boat wobble too much.

Rionna clicked on her examination penlight and held it like a talisman against the dark, despite the futility of its pinpoint light. Esteban reached into the boat, took out a big, rubberised flashlight, and snapped it on.

They walked up the small dirt path toward a compound something like theirs, but much rougher, hand-made. The small village of huts was built from old planks and woven stalks, topped with thatched-leaf roofs.

Elena stopped to crouch by a large garden on the side of the path. She fingered the leafy plants there. "These people are subsistence farmers. Why would—?" She stood, holding up a rubbery leaf in the light from her lamp. "These plants have been trampled. Someone's walked all over them."

"Guys," said Rionna, wading back out of the darkness closer to the huts, "look at this." Elena's lamp followed Rionna's finger. Where it landed, they saw a cow lying dead on its side.

In spite of their apprehension, they continued up the path toward the huts. "What's going on here?" asked Rionna. "Do you think they've been attacked?"

"I don't see why anyone would attack them," said Esteban, "they don't have anything." He took a chance and called ahead, asking in the region's dialect of Spanish if anyone was there. They heard nothing in reply but the sharp *caw* of a bird in the leafy canopy overhead.

Ed and Hugh approached the closest building. Hugh went first, climbing the few wooden steps to the door. Hugh knocked. The door had no lock or knob, just a hole with a cord knotted on either side. He pushed the door open, calling "*Upe!*" to be polite.

The room was full of people. "Oh, I'm sorry," said Hugh in English, not thinking. The air was hot, and thick with a sour smell. The only light in the room came from a battery lamp, but that was failing, burning down to a dim beige glow.

It took Hugh a second to notice that no one's eyes or face registered his presence.

The others came in with their lights. Around them sat a community of slack faces and empty expressions. Hugh found the couple he'd spoken to at the clinic, toppled against each other, holding hands. The woman still wore her woven yellow shirt, now badly soiled. Hugh put his hands on theirs. Beside them, a little girl about four years old lay flopped against the wall, uncared-for, though presumably theirs. Hugh gently pulled her up straight, but she gave no sign of noticing.

"What are they—?" asked Rionna, staring into the face of a young man. She flashed her light across his eyes, then feigned poking him in the eye. "There's reflexes here, but they're nominal."

"What is this?" asked Hugh.

"I have no idea. It's not meningitis," said Rionna.

"That I know."

"It's like they're awake, but somehow... they're not conscious."

"How long do you think they've been like this?"

"I don't know, maybe, five days?"

"Right about the time they got their last shots from us," said Hugh, not completely surprised.

"Do you think we might have infected them with something else?" asked Elena, directing the question to Rionna.

"I know we did," answered Hugh, standing, seething. "We gave them this."

"Hugh," said Elena, trying to keep things calm, "why would we do that?"

"I'm not blaming any of you. It's Rudiger who's responsible for this."

"Careful, Hugh, that's a good man you're talking about," said Esteban. Rionna stood beside him, physically adding her agreement. "Never mind that he's the one who's been paying for you to stay here."

"I'm working for someone else, someone who's been following Rudiger for years. He's not here performing acts of mercy. He's using this place as a big petri dish. And," he looked back at the couple and their daughter, "these people are just an experiment, part of his human trials."

Elena gripped her forehead with her hand. Hugh pointed to her, "You know it's true, don't you? He's creating *things* out here, then introducing them back home as discoveries from the 'wilds of the rainforest.'"

Elena nodded, her doubts confirmed.

"You're all free to do what you want. I have no idea what exactly he's doing out here, but I have a responsibility to stop it. And if I don't, there are others who will. I don't want any of you around when that happens." He walked to the door of the hut. "I've been lying to you all along, and that makes me sorrier than I can tell you. But Rudiger's got worse enemies than me, and you don't want to get in their way."

He looked at the villagers, frozen in time like a museum diorama. "Rionna, what can we do for them?" he asked.

She touched the young man beside her on the cheek. "I don't know. I haven't got any equipment, and I have no idea what I'm looking at. We can't possibly take them all back with us." She paused, thinking, then shook her head. "I think we have to leave them for tonight, and try to come back with help tomorrow. Maybe the doctor—"

"Rionna, I don't think the doctor is the right one to help them," said Elena gently but definitively.

"So you're turning your back on him, just like that?" said Esteban. "Just because Hugh said these things?"

"Esteban, it checks out with everything I've seen in the plants the doctor's brought me. But I don't care about that. Right now we've got to do something about this situation."

"But we haven't got any food," said Ed.

"No, we don't," said Rionna, "but what they need most is water. And there's plenty of that around. And we can clean them up a bit before we go. Then in the morning, we'll get them some kind of help." With that, she started assigning them each duties. They boiled water in the empty kitchen building and carried it back to the main house. They tipped enamel cups of water to the villagers' lips, finding that they had enough residual reflexes to swallow. They carried buckets of river-water and boiled them to provide for a superficial cleaning.

Slightly before midnight, they ran out of things they could do with the supplies at hand. One by one, they left the hut, taking a last look at the catatonic villagers. Rionna was last, and decided to leave the battery-powered lamp behind, since the lamp they found in the room died out an hour before. As she tried to rest it upright on the floor, it toppled over, shining directly into the face of the little girl, who squinted and made a face.

"Hey!" said Rionna, calling out to the others. She righted the lamp, then kneeled by the girl, testing her with the penlight. She was far from normal, but definitely reacted to the light. Rionna ran out after the others to tell them what she'd found.

"So you think this was a temporary effect?" asked Hugh.

"I think so," said Rionna. She looked back at the hut. "I feel like I shouldn't leave them. In case they wake up."

"Do you feel safe staying behind?" asked Hugh. He felt bad, manipulating the situation this way, knowing how Esteban would respond. But they'd already shown their feelings in favour of the doctor. He had to make his move tonight, and their loyalties would get in the way.

"I'll stay with her," said Esteban. The others agreed, and headed for the boat. As they walked down the dark dirt path to the dock it started raining. By the time they got into the boat and Ed pulled the engine to life, the rain was pouring. Drops pelted the surface of the water, making it a glossy black stucco. Ed knew the area a little, and they had the one rubber flashlight to give a little help, but the dark here in the forest was enveloping, disorientating. Ed headed down a few wrong turns before finding the open river again. They were tired, and the rain falling on their heads felt like an insult. But they all rode in silence; after what they'd seen, they couldn't complain.

~

Ed pulled the boat up alongside the dock. Hugh jumped out and tied it to one of the posts. Elena stepped out, then shone the flashlight back for Ed to see his way from the back. Water splashed around Ed's feet; two inches of rain had collected in the bottom on the ride home.

Hugh opened the boathouse and stepped inside. A moment later he emerged, his arms weighted down by two full jerry cans of gasoline. "Grab some more of these," he told the others.

"Hugh?" asked Elena. Ed was already inside.

They followed Hugh across the compound. "Are we doing what I think we're doing?" asked Elena.

He stopped at the door to Rudiger's house and turned to face them. "Do we really have a choice?" he asked. "Do you want him to keep doing what he did to those people?"

"No," said Ed immediately.

Elena looked toward the lab, then back at the two men. All that work, all the things they could have done.

"No," she said.

"All right," said Hugh, testing the front door of the house. "Locked. Damn. Any suggestions, Ed?"

Ed looked around the compound, then back at the door. It was metal. But the tinted walls were glass, albeit thick glass. He put down his jerry cans and ran back to the boathouse. A minute later, he returned with a crowbar in his hand. "Stand back," he said, winding up as swinging at a baseball. Hugh and Elena stepped back down the stairs.

The first hit made a big sound, but seemed to do nothing. Ed struck again, and again. The silvery pane wobbled, but wouldn't give. Ed went berserk, whacking the iron rod against the huge mirror until, to his surprise, the panel he attacked shattered and fell like an armoury's worth of swords. He jumped back to avoid getting gored by the shards, falling off the stairs into the mud.

The three looked at the gap in the house's surface. Ed laughed in a way that spooked Hugh. It made sense, though, thought Hugh, that Ed would lose it, destroying what he'd helped to build for several years. Elena kept stealing glances at the lab.

"Awright, Ed!" cried Hugh. "Let's go." They climbed the stairs and Hugh directed them to move the gasoline inside. "I'm assuming," Hugh said, "that somewhere in this house Rudiger's got the rest of his research stowed away."

"So we should find it, right, and not just torch the place?" asked Elena, looking around. The house was open, with a second floor ledge overlooking the living-room where they stood. The kitchen and eating area occupied one corner, with stainless steel appliances not unlike the lab's equipment. Everything in the house was neatly arranged, as if in a pattern.

"You guys check upstairs and in the kitchen," said Hugh. He felt silly: this was just a house. If it hadn't been for the sight of the villagers, he'd doubt any suspicions he had of the doctor now. The house had been an impenetrable secret; now it was just a house.

He walked to the small reading area at the rear of the house facing back into the forest. It was a cozy arrangement of deep leather chairs and a low wooden table sitting on a rug, a few medical journals scattered across the table's surface. He lifted the corner of the rug, but saw nothing conspicuous about the floorboards.

Elena reported that there was nothing in the kitchen. Ed ran down the stairs, announcing his discovery: a box marked "Biohazard".

"Wait," said Hugh, "I've seen this before. I carried it to the house when I first got here. Well, at least I get a chance to satisfy my curiosity." Ed opened the flaps of the cardboard box, and they looked inside. A polystyrene rack half the depth of the box held a dozen of the little bottles that fit into Rudiger's inhaler. There was room for twice that many bottles, and it looked like there was another rack underneath. "Anyone have any idea what this stuff is?" asked Hugh, holding one up. The others shook their heads. "Well, he's taking it, and it doesn't seem to be hurting him. In fact, I like him better when he's had some."

Hugh looked straight ahead at the stairs. There was a closet under them, set into the wood panelling. He left Elena and Ed with the box and headed for the door. He yanked it open, surprised when it didn't give a wooden creak, but a hiss. The inside was padded and had a seal around the edge like a refrigerator door. Stairs led to a basement. He went straight down.

"Wait," said Elena, going after him. Ed put the box down on the reading table and followed her.

The basement was long and unfinished, concrete walls with hanging fluorescent lighting. It was just three feet higher than Hugh's head.

Beside them stood a large filing cabinet and a small table covered in papers and files. Animal cages lined the walls, and a large cage sat against the opposite wall, covered with a quilt, pink and white with patchwork ponies.

Hugh looked at one of the cages. At first he thought the thing inside was one of Rionna's monkeys. He leaned closer to the cage. It wasn't a monkey. "Guys," he said to the others as they entered the room, "these are babies! Sort of." No matter which way he turned his head, he couldn't resolve the thing's features.

"Oh God," gasped Ed. Elena stared, personally horrified but scientifically interested.

It was as pink and raw-looking as a baby gerbil, and just as blind. Its head wasn't the right shape, as if deflated in the front. Its hand-claws clutched unconsciously at the air.

Hugh felt queasy. He leaned his hands on his knees and breathed deeply. At least the air was good down here, probably filtered and controlled in some way. He stood up. "Okay, I gotta know what the hell *that* is," he said, pointing at the large cage. He walked to it and grabbed a corner of the quilt.

He squatted and gently lifted the quilt just enough to look in. "Aaaa!" he yelled, falling back onto the floor. The cage shook. Hugh backed away on his hands and feet like a crab. His face was flushed with embarrassment.

"What is it?" asked Elena.

"It's a — a little girl. But, it's, it's—" The cage shook again. Whatever was inside was awake now. Elena carefully slid the quilt from the cage.

"That's — that's a *big* little girl," said Ed, looking at the thing. She wore a girl's clothes — a simple denim overall skirt — and her black hair poked from her head in two ponytails. But Ed guessed that she was about nine feet tall. The cage was far too small; she curled up around a large teddy bear. Or, the very chewed remnants of a teddy bear. Her slack lower jaw jutted forward, exposing a rack of teeth like unmarked dice. Her tiny forehead sloped over her dark eyes, which skipped back and forth between them. Her panting breath was audible.

"Her name's Lucy," said a voice behind them. They turned to see Rudiger, with Federico standing behind him. "I named her after my mother."

"I'm sure she'd be thrilled," said Ed.

"That little girl is the most important scientific discovery since electricity," said Rudiger defiantly. "She may not be conventionally beautiful on the outside, but in her composition, she's a work of art."

"If you do say so yourself," said Elena.

"I do," said Rudiger, "and why shouldn't I? I made her."

"Like you made the plants I've been studying," she said. "What is she, some kind of clone?"

The doctor laughed. "Elena, I've been cloning for thirty-odd years. No, this is even better. I've created life from scratch. And Lucy is the first human I've made this way. She has a 'sister' in the village, whose genome I used as a template. Then I made some improvements."

Hugh thought about this, mentally replaying the faces of the villagers they saw that night. Rudiger had been in Costa Rica about five years. That meant Lucy was copied from the daughter of the couple Hugh spoke to at the clinic. But she was only—"Four years old? That thing is only four years old?"

"Yes," said Rudiger, "she's matured very quickly. And yet I think I've managed to balance her mitochondrial DNA and her telomerase levels so that she'll still outlive all of us."

"But she's as dumb as a cow," quipped Ed, wagging a finger in front of the cage, while Lucy followed it with her head.

"Well," said Rudiger, "that's a bit harsh. And, no, that wasn't quite what I was hoping for. These from-scratch creations become mentally unstable as adults. I had better results with cloned human fetuses back in my early days." The doctor walked to the cage, took a dog biscuit from his pocket, and passed it through the thin bars to Lucy.

"When I started, creating her was my highest aim. But in the end, she's more of a by-product. The really big finding of the study was something else, something more important."

"More important than creating a viable human embryo without a sperm and egg?" asked Elena, incredulous.

"Yes," he said. "Elena, what would you say is the Holy Grail in the study of human physiology?"

"Life extension, I suppose," she replied.

"Hmm, no, but this would allow for that. Indefinitely. Be more specific. What's the least understood aspect of the human animal? About our brain, more specifically?"

She thought for a moment, then her jaw dropped open. "You—?"

"Yes. *Consciousness*. I've discovered the *biological component of consciousness*."

He moved to one of the smaller cages and took a gerbil-baby from it. "What's remarkable about this creature," he said, "is that it is has no self-awareness. It exists purely by instinct, no individual consciousness."

"It has no soul," said Ed, pityingly.

"That's a fanciful way of putting it," said Rudiger, "particularly since 'soul' suggests some extra element that has no factual existence. Lucy showed me how materially real and alterable awareness is." He cradled the baby rat-creature in one arm, and pinched it with all his might.

"Stop it!" said Elena.

"But look," said Rudiger, "it doesn't mind. It has no mind. There are no ethical implications here. We could use creatures like this for organ transplants, for drug testing, for—"

"You're sick," said Hugh.

Rudiger walked around the room, letting loose all the pink creatures, placing them on the floor. They hopped around, sniffing the air and following him. "I can understand your reaction, because you can't make the distinction between existence and consciousness. You have consciousness, so you can't imagine another living thing without it."

"What about the villagers?" asked Hugh. "What did you do to them?"

"Nothing permanent. In fact, they should be back to normal by now. I just needed to know if consciousness was, in fact, alterable in a mature organism. So I temporarily suspended theirs. Imagine, consciousness as a right. If a prisoner proves psychopathic, with no remorse or hope of rehabilitation, you simply remove his *self* as punishment."

"I've heard enough," said Hugh. "Yes, Doctor Rudiger, you're a genius. But you're also demented. You can't keep on doing this."

"Elena," asked Rudiger, "don't you see how important this is? You know we can't stop our work now. Let's just clean up the house and forget this evening ever happened."

"No, Rudiger, it stops tonight," said Hugh, pulling himself up straight. Federico bristled on the other side of the room.

Ed stood beside Hugh. "I'm with him. What you're doing here isn't right, and I can't be part of it any more."

"Elena?" asked the doctor.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," she said, "but you've stepped over too many boundaries here. Good taste is the least of them."

"You would really destroy all this?" asked Rudiger.

"I couldn't live with myself if I didn't," she said.

"Of course, I can't let you do that," said Rudiger. He lifted a metal pin from the door of Lucy's cage. She opened it with one of her unnaturally long and hairy arms, and slowly squeezed herself out. Ed, Hugh, and Elena backed toward the stairs, but Federico blocked their way. Their eyes widened as the creature stood as tall as she could in the room, her head bent against the ceiling. The gerbil babies hopped out of her way, clinging to Rudiger. He walked past her. "Come on, Federico," he said. "Let's leave them to sort this out."

He started to climb the stairs, his offspring in his arms and around his feet. He turned back and yelled, "Sic'em, Lucy. Sic'em!" then ran upstairs, closing the door.

Lucy's head angled down and she growled, a low sound that filled the room. Her lower jaw with its blocky teeth hung loose, and her little top lip snarled, showing her tiny top teeth.

Ed stamped his feet and made a move toward her, trying to scare her. She cocked her head and growled louder. Ed yelled at her, "Bad Lucy! Down girl!" She opened her jaw wide and screamed at him. He grabbed one of the small cages and held it in front of him, shaking it. "Get back!" he yelled. She loped toward him.

He pitched the cage at her, but she batted it aside, sending it crashing into the other cages. She leapt at him, crashing her two fists down on him, striking his face and chest. "No!" he yelled in pain and fear.

Hugh and Elena tried to distract the creature, but she was intent on Ed, thumping him again and again. She grabbed him and pounded his head against the floor, knocking him unconscious. She raised her head, then struck with her huge jaw at his neck, tearing madly.

"Hugh, we can't help him," said Elena, scrambling up the steps, pulling him behind her.

"But, Ed—" He wanted to do something but knew he couldn't. The instinct for self-preservation overcame him. Elena clawed at the door, panting with relief to find that it had no lock. Something blocked it on the other side, but moved slightly as she pushed her shoulder against the door. Hugh pulled objects at random from the shelves beside him onto the stairs to slow Lucy in case she came after them.

Which she did. On all fours, she crunched obliviously over test tubes and boxes. "Elena, she's coming."

"I know, I know! Help me push this open!"

Together they banged the door open, knocking over the reading chair that held it. Lucy scrambled up the stairs, growling, getting ready to pounce again. Hugh and Elena tried to push the door closed on her, but they couldn't hold her back.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked the house, knocking them over and sending Lucy tumbling, shrieking, down the stairs. Outside a cloud of fire rose from the direction of the lab, illuminating the house. They looked at each other.

"Did you—?" Elena asked Hugh.

"No, we didn't get over there yet. All the gas is still here. So who—?"

"I don't care. Let's just go," he said, running toward the door, opening and tipping over the gas cans there. Elena picked one up and hurled it toward the back of the house.

The front door was open. They ran out into the rain. The compound was well-lit: flames crawled out of a hole in the front of the laboratory.

There, in the middle of the compound, stood four human figures. Rudiger was one, with his little pink creations clinging to him, Federico was another. Federico had a

rifle, and was in a stand-off with another figure: Hardt. Nadine was with the assassin, though against her will, Hugh judged from the look on her face.

"Good news and bad news," said Hugh. "Let's get to the jeeps."

"Isn't that the nun?" said Elena as they ran.

"She's the one I'm working for."

"You're with the Vatican?"

"No, no. I'll explain later."

"Hey!" said Federico, aiming his rifle at Hugh and Elena. "Stop!"

The assassin switched his aim to them, too. "Yeah, stop."

"Lucy! Help!" called Rudiger, as she bounded from the house after Hugh and Elena. In three strides she'd nearly reached Hardt. The assassin screamed and shoved Nadine in Lucy's way. Nadine screamed at the sight of the nine-foot-tall creature, who screamed back in her own way. She picked Nadine up over her head, shook her, and threw her as far away as possible. Nadine landed in a twisted lump.

The assassin backed away, pointing his gun at her. It was a metal cylinder with several little barrels, like a milkshake cup full of straws. "Boom!" he said, shaking it at her. She looked puzzled, then punched him in the face.

As he fell, moaning, his arm flung to the side, pulling the trigger of his gun. A dozen tiny black darts flew from it, rocketing across the compound. They raced past Hugh and Elena and smacked into the jeeps, sending them twisting into the air, flames pouring from them, explosions pounding them open from the inside. Hugh and Elena fell to the ground.

Lucy crouched down, distracted by the pyrotechnics. Rudiger approached her, gently touching her, scratching her neck. "Good girl." Hugh and Elena stood up and Rudiger pointed at them. "Go get 'em," he said. Lucy stood and lumbered after them.

"Elena," said Hugh, "head for the forest. We can lose her in there." He gave her a shove in that direction, and she bolted. "Hey!" said Hugh, calling to Lucy. "Hey! Over here, cave-girl." He waved his hands and started running. He was so frightened that he came full-circle to a kind of calm, unable to be any more scared. He had a faint idea of what he was going to try, a move he remembered from all those games he attended in high school.

As Lucy chased him, he circled around, back to the spot where the assassin lay on the ground clutching his jaw and rocking. Hugh scooped up the assassin's gun and dashed for the trees. Lucy followed close behind. He spun around and pointed the gun at her. "Boom!" he said, shaking it. The gesture had meaning for her now. She hunkered down and covered her head.

And Hugh slipped into the trees.

"Elena!" he called. He could see his way somewhat from the light given off by the fires in the compound. He'd wandered here before, taking walks when he first arrived. So he knew every little path, every unusual tree. "Elena?"

"Over here," she said. He followed her voice to find her. "How are we going to get out of here?" she asked when he reached her.

"It's okay, I remember the way back."

"No," she said, "I mean, how are we going to get away from the compound? And what about Rionna and Esteban?"

"Well, the villagers can help them. They're better off than we are."

"We've got to go back and get the boat," she said.

"Damn. You're right," he said, his gut falling. "And we've still got to get rid of Rudiger's research. Well, at least I've got this." He held up the little hand-cannon for her to see.

"Let's go then."

Hugh led the way back, trying to steer them close to the boathouse. The closest they could get was the kitchen-house. They burst from the bushes and ran.

"Hugh!" called Elena. "The boat's gone!"

So was Hardt. "Keep running! Head back to the forest!"

Lucy caught up with them. For a moment the giant idiot-child seemed to be playing a game as she paced alongside them. Then she snarled and grabbed Elena. The two women fell in a heap. Lucy clamped her jaw down on Elena's leg, snapping it. Elena screamed. Lucy stood, and pounded a huge foot into Elena's chest, silencing her.

"No!" yelled Hugh. He shook the gun at the creature. "Boom! Boom! Boom! I'm gonna blow your head off!"

A figure moved in the doorway of the house: Rudiger, with his gerbil-spawn. Federico stood beside him, throwing the empty gas cans through the open panel, trying to clean up.

"Lucy," said Hugh, snarling now himself, "if you don't back off I'll kill him."

Lucy looked where he was pointing the gun. "Yes, that's right. Boom-Rudiger."

The doctor spotted him. He carried the silver jet-syringe they'd used at the clinic, and was loading something into it.

Lucy whacked Hugh across the chest with her arm and ran toward the doctor. He fell to the ground, clutching his side. The gun fell from his hand, just out of reach. He crawled toward it. The movement was excruciating.

Lucy turned around to see Hugh pick up the gun and prop himself up on the ground to aim it. Her simple face registered fear, not fear for her own safety, but fear for her master. She threw Rudiger from the doorway just as Hugh pulled the trigger as hard as he could. The rest of the dart-missiles, thirty of them, shot from their chambers and whistled toward the house.

Lucy screamed. She, Federico and the mindless creatures were hit, blown back into the house. Other darts hit the remaining glass panels and exploded. The glass fell like a frozen waterfall punctuated by fire. Another dozen darts went through the open door and hit the struts and the gas stove, causing the whole house to explode and collapse in on itself.

The shape of the building was obscured by heat and flame as the doctor rolled over to look at it. He leaned back and reached into his jacket to get his inhaler. He sucked deeply on it, then put it away and picked up the jet-syringe that lay by his side. He stood and paced slowly over to Hugh.

Hugh lay on the ground, panting shallowly to keep his side from hurting. He looked up at the doctor.

Rudiger crouched beside him, as if to speak. His lips pursed angrily. The man shook his head. "Goodbye," he said, and pressed the syringe to Hugh's neck.

~

"He's awake," said a voice.

"Sir, can you hear me?"

Hugh opened his eyes. He saw a doctor. But she spoke with an accent. *A Spanish accent? Where am I?* he wondered.

"He's awake," said the nurse.

"I can see that," said the doctor. "Sir, do you know where you are?"

He tried to concentrate. "Yes," he said. He let his mind do its autopilot work. "Costa Rica." He looked around. "But I don't know exactly where I am right now."

"You're in a hospital. In Cartago."

"How did I get here?"

"It seems that you walked for a number of days. I have no idea how you found your way here. You had a broken rib, which we managed to mend. But you were also delirious with some kind of a fever."

"But you were able to cure me?" he asked

"No," said the doctor. "You got better on your own. Good thing, too, because you had some sort of virus that we've never seen." The doctor looked at his chart.

"Have you ever had this before?"

"No," said Hugh. His throat was dry, and his voice cracked. The nurse gave him a paper cup of water. "I've never been sick before."

"What do you mean?" asked the doctor.

"Just that: I've never been sick before," he said.

"Okay," she replied, confused. She ran a hand through her black and silver hair, then adjusted her glasses. "We'll get back to that. But there's also the matter of your identity."

"What? My name's Hugh Willard." He reflexively moved to reach for his wallet, but he was in bed wearing a hospital gown with no backside, let alone pockets.

"Yes, that's what your identification said. It also said that you were Canadian. So in order to make a claim with your government for your health care expenses, we had to send them a sample of your DNA."

"Oh," said Hugh. He didn't know how he felt about that. But they were taking care of him, so he couldn't complain.

"And it turns out that you're already checked into a hospital in Toronto, Canada."

"What?"

"Do you know someone named Simon Williams?"

Hugh went pale, then passed out again.

Chapter 9

"You look like hell," said Ted, taking Hugh's duffel bag from him and tossing it in the trunk of his car.

"We were so worried," said Oswald.

"Thanks for picking me up," said Hugh, "I don't think I would have lasted on the subway." He opened the back door of the car and dropped himself in. Oswald closed the door and got in the passenger seat. Ted drove, as always.

"We wouldn't have let you take the subway," said Oswald over his shoulder.

"Not in your condition."

"My condition is fine," said Hugh.

"Hah!" barked Oswald. "So you're not losing consciousness anymore?"

Consciousness. It was a wonder that he'd regained it at all. Surely Rudiger meant to eradicate it completely. "No," he said, "I'm just kinda sleepy." He started hacking into his sleeve, trying not to be heard.

"And you have a nasty cough," added Oswald.

"It could be worse," said Hugh. "It could be a lot worse."

~

Hugh agreed to stay at the bed and breakfast that night and let Oswald and Ted take care of him. Luckily, he'd not had a chance to sublet his apartment, so it was still waiting for him. But it would be a mess and he didn't want to face that just yet. *Well*, he thought, *everything is a mess right now*. He had no idea where to start. And he'd never felt like this before, so — *sick*.

Oswald handed Hugh a cup of hot water with lemon and ginger steeped in it, then tucked the blanket around him on the couch where he sat. He had to admit that this was kind of enjoyable, a luxury he never afforded himself, mainly because he'd never been sick, and he didn't really have anyone to take care of him. Or so he'd thought. He felt himself uncoil inside, being in the company of friends. No secrets here.

"So who's this Simon person you mentioned on the phone?" asked Ted.

Well, almost no secrets.

"Oh, I mentioned him, eh?"

Oswald sat down next to Hugh, hands in his lap, waiting for information. "So? This is someone you know? This is the guy who used your ID at the hospital or something, right?"

Hugh sighed. "Yeah, I know him. But I don't understand the rest of it. Apparently there's some mix-up with our DNA records. I have to go to the hospital on Monday so they can... Oh God."

"What?" asked Oswald.

"That means he'll probably be there, too."

"And that's bad," added Ted, judging from the look on Hugh's face.

"We haven't spoken to each other in years." Hugh tugged at his hair. "I can't see him."

"Go back a bit, Hugh. Who is this guy? Were you—?" Oswald asked, leaning closer, anxious to get some dirt at last about Hugh's life before he met them.

"No, we weren't. Well, kinda, but not what you're thinking. He's been my best friend all my life. Our mothers were friends, and we grew up together. We were inseparable, so everyone just lumped us together and called us 'The Willies'. Simon Williams, Hugh—"

"—Willard. Right, I get it," said Ted, sitting opposite them in his chair.

"So what happened?" asked Oswald.

“Well, he met this girl—”
 “Oh, it’s always a girl,” said Oswald to Ted.
 “And they fell in love and decided to get married.”
 “Yeech,” said Oswald.
 “You should talk,” said Hugh, “you guys have been married for years.”
 “Yes, but legally only for ten, because of our backward-ass laws,” interjected Ted.
 “Anyway, I didn’t like this girl, and it all just didn’t seem right. So you know that part in the ceremony when they say ‘If anyone knows a reason why this couple should not be married?’”
 “You didn’t!” said Oswald, his eyes flaring open.
 “I was really drunk, so I’m not completely sure. But I never liked his fiancée much, so I probably did.”
 “So what happened?” asked Ted.
 “Well, I stood up to speak, but as I started I kinda fell over. So they dragged me out, then kept going.”
 The three sat in silence for a moment. “I know,” said Hugh, “I’m an idiot.”
 “Well,” said Oswald, “no, you did it because of your friendship, because you cared about him. Though I can see why he’d be upset.”
 “I don’t think he was the one that was upset. It was her. I’m sure she’s been keeping him from talking to me. She always hated me.”
 “Hey,” said Ted, “Sorry we’re dredging this all up. You must still be really tired.”
 “Actually,” said Hugh, adjusting his covers so he could sit up, “I’m a bit burnt-out, but I want to catch up with you guys.”
 “So, then, tell us about your trip,” said Oswald.
 “Trip,” said Hugh, laughing. “It wasn’t exactly a trip. God, where do I start? Well, do you remember that panda?”

~

Hugh walked back through the flower room. Though he enjoyed the heady fragrance of the plants, the atmosphere wasn’t quite what he was looking for. He opened the wooden door to the central room of the Horticultural Society building. Palms stretched up to the domed glass roof. He took a deep breath in the thick, warm, moist air. This was more like it.

He sat on a small wrought-iron bench whose filigree pattern was almost lost underneath years of paint. He stretched out his legs and angled his head back to look up at the trees. If he squinted his eyes till they were almost shut, he could imagine he was back in the rainforest.

I’ve killed people, he thought. *Well, people and those other things*. For the rest of his life, nothing he did could undo that fact.

His chest tightened as he thought about Ed and Elena. And Federico. And Nadine. If he hadn’t gotten involved, they would all still be alive. But then there was Rudiger and his work. Thinking of that gave him back his resolve — until he thought of his friends again. *Who am I*, he wondered, *to be responsible for such things?* Right now, he had no idea.

He opened his eyes fully. The early summer sun cut swaths through the palms. Costa Rica was gone. He was in Toronto, waiting for a doctor’s appointment.

How could he and Simon have the same DNA? Maybe their records got mixed up when they were little. But no, he thought, he’d never been sick before. And as far as he knew, neither had Simon. All through grade school, when other children suffered

from the usual plagues — chicken pox, measles, mumps — they were fine. They envied the kids who got to miss classes because of flus and colds.

Costa Rica was just supposed to be an exciting job. Now things were worse than they were when he left. He'd done unspeakable things, he had no work, and now there was this strange medical thing to sort out.

He checked his watch: still half an hour before his appointment. He felt his heart beating; he knew that he was going to see Simon. He didn't know how, but he could feel it.

~

"I think they're just trying to soak us for more money. You're already seeing a physio-therapist; there's no reason for you to have to pay to see a doctor again."

"Fleur, honey, the doctor's been great. I doubt that he sets up appointments with me just to — I dunno, pay for his golf membership," said Simon. He approached the receptionist's desk and gave his name.

Fleur took magazines from a pair of chairs. She sat on one chair and patted the other. With a slight wince, Simon sat down.

"Are you okay?" Fleur asked.

"Yeah. It's just feels like a stitch in my side sometimes when I move a certain way. The physio said it's normal."

"Well, it's good that you're taking time off to get better. Besides, it's been nice having you around."

"Yeah," he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "But I can't just ride the streetcar with you forever. I've got to get back to work."

She clamped her hands on one of his and put it on her lap. "Simon, you're getting older. You can't do this forever. What if you get hurt again?"

"I know it was a bad break, but you don't understand. It's practically a whole new rib that they gave me. They sawed out the shattered part — took it right out — and replaced it with a new piece of bone they grew from my cells. All I have to do is get the muscles back to normal, and they say I'm good to play again."

Fleur sighed.

"I can't quit yet. Don't ask me why, but I know it's just not time."

"Because you're not famous? Is that it?" she asked. "Am I not enough? Why do you need all kinds of strangers to love you?"

"It's not just that. It's about being my best. No, that's not even it. It's about being the best, period. Maybe it sounds arrogant, but I know I could be." A nurse called his name. "Think about your award," he said, "and maybe you can understand."

~

"Well, Mister Willard, I — I don't know what to say."

"So say it's a mistake and let me go," said Hugh. He stood up from the tall stool where he'd been sitting, holding his jacket.

"No, it's not a mistake," said the doctor.

"But I'm right here, and you can see that I'm not Simon Williams. So there's been a mix-up."

"No, no mix-up," said the doctor. He pointed to a large pair of screens on his wall. Each was lit up with a raggedy-edged spectrum that wrapped around the screen several times before showing all its colours. "Human beings are almost identical from a genetic standpoint. Hell, we're almost the same as frogs." He turned from the screens. "Let me back up. You do have an idea what genes do, right?"

I could quote you the encyclopaedia, thought Hugh. But instead he gave a tilting “kinda” hand.

“Okay,” said the doctor, “think of it like an old computer. Remember software? Well, DNA is like software. And the proteins in the body are like the hardware, taking instructions from the software to run the computer.” He turned back to his rainbows and mumbled “Sort of” below his breath. He drew a circle with his finger around the same coloured spot in each of the stripes. The screen drew a white line behind his fingertip. “Any two people are only different by about one percent.”

“But Simon and I?”

“About a ten thousandth of a percent.”

Hugh swallowed hard. “So maybe it’s a coincidence. Or, or it’s because we grew up in the same suburb. Maybe there was a leak at the old Pickering nuclear power plant.”

“Mutations on that scale would have killed you a long time ago. And I highly doubt it’s a coincidence. You’re exactly the same in all your junk DNA, the introns that don’t code for any useful functions. The only differences we can spot with our equipment are in a couple of areas — memory, motor skills, and some others that we think might be related to secondary characteristics, like hair colour and appearance. And there’s a—” The doctor trailed off with a little laugh.

“What?” asked Hugh.

“There’s a strange arrangement of proteins here and here,” he said, pointing to the ends of the two rainbow stripes. “If I saw this in a lab, I’d say it was a marker, a signature of sorts.”

“But this isn’t a lab experiment. This is *me*,” Hugh said, pointing at the spectrum on the left. “Or that’s me.” He pointed to the right.

“Uh, yeah, that’s you,” said the doctor, pointing to the right.

“But there are differences, aren’t there? So I’m clear with the health insurance people?”

“Oh, yes, of course. My report will clear all that up,” said that doctor. “But we’d like to do more tests with you and Mister Williams.”

“But I don’t have to if I don’t want to, right?” asked Hugh, standing up.

“Well, no, but we’d really appreciate it if you helped us. We’ve never seen anything like this before, a pair of—”

“Don’t say it!” said Hugh, covering his ears.

The doctor fell silent. Hugh, embarrassed, let his hands drop.

“I’m sorry,” said the doctor. “What did you think I was going to say?”

Hugh sighed. “Clones.”

“The idea had occurred to me. You’re at least identical twins. But even twins—” He gestured to his screen. “It doesn’t explain this. You’d look alike. And you wouldn’t be so different in such particular ways. This—” The doctor laughed. “This is just plain weird.”

“Can I go now?” asked Hugh.

“Sure.” The doctor looked anxious. “But do you think you’ll help us?”

Hugh frowned. “I’m sorry, but I have to go and think about this for a bit. It’s a bit overwhelming.”

“I understand,” said the doctor. “And if you need a counsellor, I can give you a recommendation.”

“Thanks,” said Hugh, and headed for the door.

~

Fleur stabbed her finger at the elevator button.

"No, I don't see how he could have done this," said Simon.

"Oh, don't underestimate him. It's just like him to do something like this. Just when I thought he'd finally let you go and we were rid of him."

"Honey," said Simon, following her into the elevator car, "how could he have rigged a medical test?"

"I don't know. You tell me. You're his best friend."

The doors closed. Panting, Hugh poked his head around the corner. He sighed; they didn't see him.

Chapter 10

Hugh sat back and lowered his head into the bath water. He sighed, and heard the sound of his breathing eerily amplified. A moment later, he became conscious of his heartbeat. He tried to stop thinking and imagine he was floating, but that immediately conjured the image that he was a corpse floating down the Don River. The city noises, their treble cut off, rumbled their way through the water, the tub, and the rest of his apartment building.

Life is easy for some people, he thought. *They just drift and react, and things just work out for them.* But Hugh felt as though he thought too much about everything. He'd been told countless times that he was "too intense". On its own, he thought, putting a facecloth across his stomach, it was good quality, by virtue of the old "unexamined life not worth living" thing. The problem was where his life overlapped with other peoples'.

People like Simon, he thought. Everything seemed to roll off Simon like water. Everybody loved him, too, usually at their own expense.

Hugh fumbled around, trying to lift the plug with his foot. *Right*, he remembered, *Simon is the coordinated one. I'm the one who remembers every—*

"Oh my God," he said aloud, sitting up in the tub. He'd had this feeling before, of plunging over a waterfall of realisation. When he was younger, it usually happened when he thought of death, understanding in stages that it was real, that it waited for him. Then the feeling would subside, only to lead to an even higher waterfall: he really, really was going to die one day. But this time the idea wasn't death. It was something else.

Simon and I are the same person.

But they weren't, they couldn't be. They were so different. Simon was handsome and athletic and easygoing. He had dark hair, even! Hugh's brain tumbled like a sneaker in the dryer, trying to work its way out of the paradox. They weren't twins, or even related. Hugh knew Simon's mother as well as he knew his own. He pictured her making waffles for them after a sleep-over.

He got out of the tub and towelled himself off. He opened the mirrored bathroom cabinet, took out a tube from which he squeezed some blue goo, put the tube back and put the goo into his hair, pulling it to one side. He closed the cabinet and looked at himself in the mirror, trying to see some resemblance to Simon. Did he look like him? *Well, sort of*, he thought. *Really?* he wondered, cocking his head to get a different angle. *No, not really.*

Hadn't he given Simon enough thought for a lifetime? Why did this have to happen, bringing Simon back from the past like some undead thing?

He felt a rush in his chest, a familiar old thrill. There was something about Simon, a kinship. He'd never felt so close to anyone else, so understood. *Yeah*, he thought, there'd always been that feeling that there was something the same about them.

Hugh didn't know where Simon was or what he was doing now. He'd managed at last to lose track of him. But whatever he was doing, it was probably something great. Simon was always the more prominent one of them.

What am I, then? wondered Hugh. *Just him but less?*

No, he countered, he was the one who helped Simon make it through school. He was the one with the mind. He was—

Genetically the same person.

He went to his closet and rummaged for something comfortable to wear. He was going to meet Jenny for a coffee in their old building, to find out what she'd done after they left the law firm.

He closed the closet door and put on his jacket. The whole thing was a stupid mistake, and he wasn't going to think about it anymore. He'd had enough of clones on his trip to Costa Rica. And he was not a clone, he was Hugh Willard.

Hugh Willard left his apartment.

~

"Honey, will you get me the paper?" called Fleur from the kitchen. She always liked to read it over breakfast, dismembering every section as she went. Simon could never put it back together, but he didn't mind; he wasn't much of a reader.

"Sure," said Simon. He opened the front door and stooped to pick up the paper. But he stopped partway down, staring at it.

His face was on the front page. And there beside him was a picture of Hugh, a little thinner in the face, and with shorter hair. But definitely Hugh. On the front page.

Above their pictures was a headline: "Local Hospital Makes Clone Discovery".

From inside, he heard Fleur. "Honey?"

He snatched the paper up from the ground and held it close to his chest. As he did, a neighbour across the street looked at him from her front lawn where she was gardening. *She's on the paper-route, too*, thought Simon. The look on her face confirmed that she'd already seen today's edition. He let go of his grip on the paper. There was no point hiding it; Fleur would see it sooner or later. He brought it in to her.

Her shriek reverberated off the kitchen walls.

When she finished her sputtering, he calmed her and suggested that they read the article together. The hospital, it turned out, published the results of Simon and Hugh's tests in a medical journal, and the story had been picked up by the major newswires. In typical journalistic manner, the news services simplified the details to make for better copy; Simon and Hugh were now officially "the world's first human clones".

They moved to the living room and turned on the hotbox, their home information appliance. All the channels featured the story on one of their pages. They stopped on one that was broadcasting the story live. An announcer spoke in front of a panel that featured worm-like strands of DNA and the words "Human Clones"; Hugh and Simon's faces were featured to one side. Simon tapped the screen to get a blow-up of his picture.

"Hey," said Simon, pleased, "this one says I'm a star lacrosse player."

"Great," said Fleur. "Shame that nobody asked you before publishing this."

"I guess they think it's news. They don't have to ask to print news, do they?"

"I'm talking about the hospital," she said. She rummaged through a pile of papers on the counter until she found a business card. "I'm phoning that doctor you spoke to."

Fleur dialled the number and waited a long time to speak to someone. When she got through, she asked for the doctor. "What do you mean, he's not taking calls? Tell her it's Fleur Williams calling for her husband Simon. Yeah, *that* one. Uh-huh. Yes, I thought he'd want to speak to us."

She put the phone down and pushed the handsfree button. The doctor answered right away, sounding harried. "I'm so sorry," he said, before Fleur had a chance to start in on him. "I need you to understand that I didn't publish those test results."

"So who did?" asked Fleur.

"The hospital did. We're in danger of being closed by the provincial government. They've been trying to shut us down for two years," said the doctor. "This time it looked like they were going to really do it. So one of the administrators got it in his head to publish every significant finding we've come up with recently so they couldn't

possibly justify the closure. Your husband's file was the biggest thing to come along since penicillin, so they went ahead and published it without asking me or contacting you. I'm really, really sorry."

"What the hell are we supposed to do now?" asked Fleur. "What's going to happen to my husband?"

Simon let her take charge, since she did it so well. As she grew louder, he tuned out. *Besides*, he thought, it was kind of neat being in the news. He'd always felt sort of special, now what they said about him confirmed it. *Well*, he considered, thinking of Hugh, *not uniquely special*. He wondered what Hugh was thinking about all this. He turned the paper to look at Hugh's picture. God, he thought, it had been a long time since he'd seen him.

~

Hugh wondered why people were staring at him as he passed. He was sure he wasn't imagining it. He broke into a run. By the time he reached the coffee-shop, he was out of breath. He stopped in the doorway, coughing.

Someone put a hand on his shoulder and spoke to him: "Hey, superstar, you okay?" He straightened up and saw Jenny. He nodded, still trying to catch his breath and stop the coughing fit. She led him inside and sat him at her table. Some of the patrons turned around in their seats to look at them. Jenny gave Hugh a drink of her coffee, which helped.

"I was all excited to tell you about my new job, but it looks like you've upstaged me," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"Haven't you seen the news today?"

"I don't read the news, remember?"

"Hm. Well, you might be interested in today's." She pushed her copy of the paper across the table for him. His eyes flared and his mouth fell open.

~

When he got home, Hugh found his phone blinking quickly on the couch. He picked it up and read "27 new messages". He readied himself to listen to them, pouring himself a glass of water, and moving to the veranda to lie down on his little grass-patch in the dusk.

Oswald had called. There were several calls from news stations, print and broadcast, Oswald again, then two more times, some more reporters, Oswald, Ted (with Oswald in the background)...

And Simon. The sound of his voice made Hugh's stomach go cold. Then something in Hugh soared — he just got a call from Simon! Then a wave of remembered hurt submerged his excitement. *It's nothing*, he told himself. *Nothing good, anyway*.

Simon talked low in his message, practically whispering. "Hey, bud. How are you doing?" he started, as if they'd just spoken last week. "What about all this news, eh? I guess you must be in the thick of it, too, by now. So I'm thinking we should make the best of it. You know, I spoke to one of these stations, and they're willing to pay a lot to have us on one of their broadcasts. And things are kind of tight this season, so I'm wondering if, you know, you want to do me a favour and go on this show. Give me a call tomorrow between eleven and five, and we can talk about it. It'll be good to catch up, too. Talk to you soon."

"Bastard!" said Hugh to the phone, and dropped it on the ground. *First time he calls he wants something*, thought Hugh. *Figures. Things are tight this season. What is*

he doing now, farming? Then he remembered the article he read at the coffee shop, which said that Simon was with Toronto's lacrosse team. No wonder Hugh hadn't heard about him: he didn't even know they had a lacrosse team. *Call between eleven and five.* Fleur's shift, he was sure of it. He hoped she was still working for the transit commission, because she used to hate it so much. She was exactly the right brand of surly for the job, too.

He closed his eyes, and couldn't help the torrent of conversation that ensued between him and his mental stand-in for Simon — five years' worth of really good speeches that he couldn't help but remember verbatim.

Would he call Simon tomorrow? He laughed to himself. Of course he would. But he'd wait until quarter after eleven, just to look casual.

~

Hugh stepped out of the taxi in front of the studio. They were going to be recorded for a live feed to millions of hotboxes around the world, in homes, pubs, cars, and elevators. The United Broadcast Network was the biggest provider of information content in the world. Hugh dreaded the thought of what information they would provide on him for the program's click-throughs — school pictures? His CV?

He paid the cab driver. Cabs were becoming a habit. He didn't mind the expense, since he was about to be paid handsomely for this appearance, and he still had money he'd been wired for his work while he was in Costa Rica.

He felt a pang about having collected money from Indigenics, then helping to blow up their operations. Mental images of Elena, Ed, and Nadine came into his mind. He didn't want to think about that, but couldn't help wondering about their families, what they'd been told. And Rudiger, where was he? It struck Hugh that appearing publicly might be a very bad idea.

Simon stood from the bench outside the studio where he'd been waiting. He was dressed in a light, casual shirt and chinos. His hair was slicked back from his face, curly in the back. He looked good, fit and confident. When he left the house, Hugh checked himself in the mirror, and thought he looked sharp in shirtsleeves and a narrow new tie. But seeing Simon, he felt square.

"Hi there," said Simon.

"Hi," said Hugh, coolly removed, extending a hand as he got within reach. Simon laughed and shrugged off the handshake, giving Hugh a hug. Hugh tried to make a resolution to himself, a mental course-correction about how he would conduct himself to make things go differently this time. But it was already too late: he was back with Simon. He wasn't just himself when he was with Simon, he was half of something more.

~

The makeup man finished the final touches on them as they walked from the green room to the sound stage. The floor manager indicated where they should sit.

Hugh took his seat and saw his image in one of the monitors. The makeup man took off the paper collar that had been protecting Hugh's shirt. "I look like I'm made of terra cotta," he said to the makeup man. "Do I have to look orange like this?"

"Wait 'til they turn on the lights. Without this, you'd look like they just dredged you up from the ocean floor. You let me do my job, and I'll let you do yours."

The hostess breezed onto the set. He'd seen her before. Unlike him, she had a pale face, with colours expertly blended around her eyes and cheeks. Her hair was a deliberately dishevelled pile of blonde hair. The belted jacket and skirt she wore were

so plain they had to be expensive. She took her seat and someone came to her side with a clipboard, pointing out the order of the day to her. She'd also brought notes of her own.

"That's good," said Hugh, leaning in to Simon, noticing that the makeup didn't look quite so awkward on him," at least someone knows what we're supposed to talk about." He looked around, wondering why there were three other chairs on the set.

"One minute," said the floor manager.

"This is exciting, eh?" said Simon.

"Is that what they call this feeling?" replied Hugh. "Did they tell you what we're going to talk about, or do some kind of pre-interview or anything?"

"Uh, no. I guess I was busy negotiating our fee. Just wing it."

"Mmm. 'Wing it'. Okay." Hugh clasped his hands and smiled at the hostess as she looked up from her pad. She gave a brief, token smile, then went back to her notes.

"Okay, let's go," said the floor manager. The lights came on, hot and intense. He counted down as a floor camera like a burnished silver Howitzer moved in, trained on the hostess, and a red light on its top lit up. A second camera aimed itself at Hugh and Simon.

"Good afternoon, and welcome to the Diane Wheeler show," said the hostess, "I'm Diane Wheeler. This afternoon, we're joined by the world's first human clones." The monitors cut away to the show's opening sequence, a flashy montage of words and colours interspersed between pictures of some of the famous guests who'd been on the show. Hugh wondered if anyone tuning in would be disappointed that they weren't going to see a movie star today.

The sequence ended, and the hostess spoke again. "The medical world was rocked this week by the discovery of two human clones. Not merely embryos in a lab, these are two men living here in Toronto, Canada, found because of a routine check of the national DNA database. Today we have with us the men in question, Hugh Willard and Simon Williams."

She introduced them and said hello. "So," she said, "which of you is a clone of which?"

"Pardon?" asked Simon.

"One of you is a clone of the other, right? So which of you is the original and which is the duplicate?"

"Uh," stammered Hugh, "we don't know that. I mean, assuming that this isn't all a mistake."

"I've been thinking that we were made at the same time," said Simon.

"So you're both clones of someone else?"

"Oh," said Simon, "yeah, I guess we'd have to be, wouldn't we?"

"So, of whom then?"

Hugh was unsettled. "I never thought about that."

"All right," she said, "let's go at this from another angle: who made you?"

"I have no idea," said Simon.

"What about you, Hugh? Do you have any ideas?" asked the hostess, growing testy. "Who would have been willing to defy the international treaty against human genetic testing? And who would have the ability to succeed where so many other scientists failed with such terrible consequences?"

"I — oh my God," said Hugh. *Rudiger*.

"Yes?" she said, probing.

"Oh, uh, nothing. I just — nothing." This was not the place to deal with the idea that his past might be bound up with Rudiger's.

"I think it's time for a commercial break," said the hostess. Music swelled, the camera's red light went off and the hostess gestured towards the glass production booth for someone to come down. That someone was dispatched quickly. She pulled his ear close to her mouth. "What the hell is this? These two don't know anything! There's no story here."

Simon looked at Hugh and smiled. Hugh returned the smile weakly. "Is this important to you?" asked Hugh.

"Honestly, I need the money. Fleur and I are in trouble. Or, it's more like I'm in trouble with Fleur. She doesn't know that I'm doing this, or that I'm seeing you."

"I figured that."

"But it could be fun, and we might find a way to—"

"To get rich and famous."

"Uh, yeah."

"Okay," said Hugh, smirking, "then just follow my lead."

The floor manager pointed to indicate that they were about to be back on air. The hostess shooed away the production assistant.

"We're here with Hugh Willard and Simon Williams, the first two human clones. Uh... Let's see," she said, looking to her clipboard for help.

"We're not like other people," said Hugh.

"What?" asked the hostess, surprised but relieved. "In what way are you not like other people?"

"Well, we've always been a little different, and now it makes sense. They didn't just clone us. They did something, changed us."

"In what way?"

"Well, let's see. Neither of us has ever been sick," he said, glossing over the fact that he'd developed a cough.

"Ever?" she asked, sitting forward in her seat.

"No. So I guess they changed our immune systems somehow. And," said Hugh, pausing for emphasis, playing up the moment, "we can do things." He let that sit for a moment. "Simon is perfectly coordinated. Anything athletic, he can do it. Show her something, Si."

Simon glowed. He reached forward for the hostess' pen. She gave it to him, and he flipped it around his fingers, then his thumb. "My assistant does that all the time," she said, "and it bugs me."

"Okay," said Simon. He stood, his movement tracked by the unmanned Howitzer camera. He picked up the various decorative objects from the table on the set and juggled them. He juggled five things, tossing them under his arms and legs, and finished by catching them one at a time on his nose with his eyes closed, then dropped them into his hand. He put the objects back on the table, then picked up the hostess' clipboard, spun it on his finger, then sat. The hostess clapped, genuinely pleased. "I can do more," said Simon, "like somersaults and stuff, but you probably don't want me to do that here."

"Good guess," she said. "May I have my clipboard back?" He stopped spinning it and handed it to her.

Hugh was glad that he could do his thing and keep his dignity intact. The hostess looked to him. "I remember things," he said. "Everything. Do you want me to tell you everything that's been on your prompter since the show started?"

"No, that's okay. How about a page out of the phone book?"

Hugh rolled his eyes. *Not that again.* "Okay, sure." The assistant slunk low onto the set with a phone book, handed it to him, and slunk away again. Hugh opened to a page, looked it over, then handed the book to the hostess, holding the page with his finger. Then he recited names, addresses, and numbers. A dozen lines later he stopped.

"It's just in there. I don't even try. So I'm figuring that if I am a clone, that's got something to do with it."

"Well, this is all quite interesting. Let's take another break, and when we come back, we'll see what our panel of cloning experts has to say about you both." Her camera's light switched off, as did her interest in Hugh and Simon.

"Thanks, Hugh," said Simon, leaning in close to him. "See wasn't that fun?"

"I feel sick. We agreed back in high school that we wouldn't do the dog-and-pony act anymore."

Three others joined them on the set. The first was a round man who wore a houndstooth jacket and tiny glasses. The second was a slim woman in baggy cotton clothes with her thick black hair pulled back like a horse's tail. And the third was a handsome middle-aged figure in a well-tailored suit.

The floor manager gave the signal. The hostess put her clipboard down on the table and clasped her hands meaningfully in front of her. She gave a brief recap of the show's topic, then introduced each of the new guests. The round, bespectacled man was a geneticist at one of the local universities. The woman was a medical ethicist. And the well-dressed man was a wealthy American businessman who'd been contesting the Asilomar Treaty in an effort to be the first person to have himself cloned.

"We'll start with you, Professor Lamont", said the host, addressing the round man. "What do you make of the claim that these men are clones?"

He swelled, pulling himself up to an authoritarian height. "Technically it's possible. It's never been done, but that doesn't mean it couldn't be. But I don't understand how they could have such differing secondary characteristics, like appearance, hair colour, and these specialised abilities. That would require a knowledge of the roles of specific genes and combinations of genes. And we simply don't have that information."

"But the Human Genome Project gave us a map of all the genes twenty-five years ago," said the businessman. "If someone kept working at it since then, despite this short-sighted treaty—"

"They might have figured out some of the genes' functions. Some," stressed Lamont. "But these men are, what, thirty years old?"

"Yes," said Hugh, feeling funny being talked about like a roadshow antique, "we're thirty."

"So it looks like someone's jumped the gun on the rest of the scientific community," said the businessman.

"Are you upset that this someone beat you to the punch, Mr. Lowell?" asked the hostess of the businessman.

"Well, disappointed, but I'm happy: this proves the point that I've been trying to make all along. Here we've had clones walking the earth for thirty years without even knowing it, and it hasn't been the end of the world."

"If I may," interjected the other guest.

"Yes, Ms. Chen."

"Clones themselves aren't the problem. It's the idea of cloning that's dangerous. It's very convenient that we forget the eugenics movement in the 1930's that sterilised the 'less desirable' members of society in order to create a purer race of citizens."

"Yes," said Lowell, "but we're not talking about Nazi Germany here."

"Neither am I. This happened here in North America. The thing that really scares me is this notion that there's some ideal to conform to, some golden mean of health and longevity and appearance. I don't think we've sufficiently answered the question yet of why we'd want to make clones to be allowed to get rid of the treaty and do it."

"Wouldn't you want to do away with disease and deformity?" asked Lowell.

"So these are bad? Have we established that? How many of our greatest thinkers would have been eliminated for their bad genes? Do we know that life won't just generate something worse for every disease we eliminate?"

"I want to go back to the questions of disease and longevity," said Professor Lamont. "Hugh, is it?" Hugh nodded. "You said that neither of you has ever been sick. That would indicate that some change may have been made to your immune systems. That could be achieved by introducing protein coat genes from all the known viruses. But then there's the matter of how long you'll live."

Hugh and Simon looked at each other. Simon shifted in his seat. "Would there be a problem with that?" he asked.

"The problem with early clones was usually their immune systems. The first cloned cows died because theirs didn't develop properly. Dolly the sheep suffered a similar fate. But in your case that seems to have been solved. As for life expectancy, though, cloning work was stopped before we ever answered the telomere question sufficiently."

"What are telomeres?" asked the host.

"They're bits of DNA at the end of your chromosomes. Kind of like the twist on a candy-wrapper. Every time one of your cells divides, the telomeres shorten — the wrapper comes a little more undone. And as you age, your cells divide again and again. When the wrapper comes undone, the cell dies. Say you were both cloned from an adult cell of a man who was thirty years old. Well, you've already got thirty years of unwrapping going on."

"So," said Hugh, "genetically, I could be sixty."

"Exactly."

The hostess looked to the floor manager and gave a little chop to her neck to ask if they should go to a break. He shook his head, rolling his hand forward.

"So the twins here are old men."

"I can't believe you're spouting this nonsense," said Lowell. "We've seen strains of mice go through their whole lives with no telomeres at all."

The ethicist leaned bodily into the men's conversation. "Uh, those are mice. *Mice*, not humans. We don't know if humans can live with shortened telomeres. Thalidomide didn't have any effect on rabbits. Haven't we learned anything about animal testing?"

The businessman ignored her and continued. "And some cloning processes managed to wind the cell's internal clock back to zero."

"Again," said Chen the ethicist, "this work has never been done in humans."

"Except for the two sitting here," said Simon, waving a finger between himself and Hugh. The experts all looked at him.

"Well," said the hostess, "I think we've come up with some questions for a future show. I want to thank you all for being here today, Hugh, Simon, Mr. Lowell, Doctors Chen and Lamont. And thank you for watching The Diane Wheeler Show."

The floor manager dropped his hand, the lights went dark, and the camera barrels dropped forward as if falling asleep. The hostess thanked them each for being on the show, then left the set. The experts wanted to stay and talk to Hugh and Simon, but Hugh said they had to leave, that they had to be somewhere else right away. Simon looked puzzled, but followed Hugh out of the studio. They turned their visitors badges in at the security desk and headed out into the street. Hugh hailed them a cab.

~

"Hi, honey. I'm going to be home late tonight. Hope you had a good day. I'll talk to you when I get home, if you're still up." Simon hung up the payphone and turned around to face Hugh, two thumbs in the air.

"That's a short leash you're wearing," said Hugh.

"She wouldn't understand. I'll explain it to her when I get home. We had to grab the opportunity in front of us. And I think we did pretty well today."

"Yeah, but I'm pretty bothered by the things they said, particularly that Lamont guy."

"Think about it, Hugh. Whoever's responsible for us had to be some kind of genius. Don't you think they'd have figured all that stuff out?"

"It's still hard for me to imagine that any of this is real. Think about it, you and me—" Hugh followed Simon to the bar. He'd never been here before, but he'd heard about it. It figured, he thought, that Simon would take them here to be seen just moments after being discovered. He had to admit that it was nice, featuring a handsome wood bar with dim lamps along it. Simon waved to the bartender and ordered a vodka martini, extra dry, with a twist of lemon. Hugh didn't have a favourite drink, let alone one whose description he'd rehearsed, so he wasn't sure what to order. "Uh, I—" he stammered, noting the bartender's impatience, "just a, uh, rye and ginger."

Simon turned around on his chair and surveyed the room. It was still Happy Hour for the local suits. When their drinks came, Simon paid the inflated price, then led them to a booth. He took a sip of his drink. "So," he said.

"Yeah," replied Hugh.

"Five years."

"Yeah, five years." Hugh had no intention of making this easy for Simon. "Forgot my number or something, eh?"

"What about you, Mister Memory?" Simon breathed. "Look, that was pretty awkward, what you did at the wedding. Fleur wasn't too happy about it. And honestly, neither was I."

"I was really drunk. I didn't know what I was saying," said Hugh, stirring the bubbles from the side of his drink, staring into it.

"I think you did, Hugh."

"Honest, Simon. It's the only thing in my life I can't remember. I blacked out, and I really have no idea what I said. Was it something bad about Fleur? Is that why she wouldn't let you talk to me?"

"No. You didn't mention her. You said something about us. You said—"

"Hey! The clones!" said one of the patron suits, dragging over two of his buddies. "I saw you guys on the hotbox today. Fellas," he said, addressing his friends, "these guys are clones of each other!"

"Uh, no," said Hugh, "we don't know that."

"Yeah, we think we might be clones of someone else," added Simon.

"If we're clones at all," said Hugh.

"Oh, c'mon. We clicked through to those test results. There's no way you're not clones."

"Okay," said Hugh, "we're clones."

"See, guys, isn't that cool? Let me buy you fellas a drink."

"I've got no problem with that," said Simon. "How 'bout you?"

"Sure, why not?" said Hugh.

Within fifteen minutes, they found themselves in a spontaneous gathering of suits from the nearby office towers, bar staff, and other patrons. They quickly ran out of questions Hugh and Simon could answer and simply amused themselves with partying. Diane Wheeler, the talk show hostess, arrived with the show's producers, and joined them. She turned out to be friendlier in life than they'd found her on the show.

Now that they had one celebrity in their midst, any other notables entering the bar fell into orbit around them. The news people traded stories, the film people traded industry and personal gossip, the business people talked stock prices and takeovers, and the clones just sat and listened. While he avoided the media because of his memory, Hugh had picked up an attitude about it, too, a disdain for anything too popular. But he couldn't help finding this all exciting.

As for finding out what he said at Simon's wedding, he decided he could wait for that. Besides, he thought, the more time he spent with Simon, the less relevant it seemed.

~

The car pulled up in front of the haberdasher's for their fitting. That night they were to appear at a fashion show at the request of the show's featured designer.

"Please," said Hugh, opening the door and stepping out, "tell me that he's not going to dress us in matching clothes."

Simon laughed, following. "I don't know. But these French guys have a thing for nipples. Women's, at least. How are yours?"

"Well, maybe a little hairier since the last time you saw them. But fine."

Fleur got out and put on her sunglasses to keep away the afternoon's glare. They happened to look good, too; she was happy that Simon bought them for her. His new-found fame was proving lucrative. Simon's team was anxious to get him back onto the field, too, to benefit from his high profile. Fleur liked the new security they enjoyed, but didn't like all these people wanting a piece of her husband, and was sticking close-by. Things were already underway — he'd put that in motion himself, and she'd just have to live with it — but that didn't mean she couldn't chaperone.

"Hey," said Hugh, stopping outside the door and lifting his shirt, "we have belly buttons. Does that make sense?"

"You have mothers, don't you?" said Fleur. He gave a shocked look: it was the first thing she'd said to him since the wedding.

~

The show was a bigger deal than they'd expected. Their moment of glory, walking down the elevated runway, went without a hitch. Hugh chafed at the simplistic images the media was creating for them: Simon the sporty clone and Hugh the brainy clone. But he didn't mind this new lifestyle, not having to work, yet being wealthier than he'd managed before.

The party following the show was even bigger than the show itself. It was held under a series of outdoor canopies, with metres of food, a live band, and a wooden dance floor laid especially for the occasion. Clear lights hung like fruit in the trees and the night was warm.

Hugh, Simon, and Fleur had been given clothes by the designer to wear to the party, and arrived to applause.

"You look great," said Hugh to Fleur, feeling nervous. Attempting to make peace was an acknowledgement of what had gone before.

"You look good, too, Hugh," she said, and moved on to join Simon where he was introducing himself to a new gaggle of people. *Hmm*, thought Hugh. A fairly neutral reaction, but she'd used his name; he took that as a good sign.

He felt a hand touch his shoulder, and turned to meet its owner. When he did, he had to suppress the start he felt. The man facing him had an eerily narrow face, with a long, thin arc of a nose. His chin was cleft on the right-hand side; Hugh realised

it was a scar. The man smiled, and his teeth — a bit too spaced, a bit too sharp — did nothing to soften the rest of his image. His clothes weren't up to the occasion, his woven brown jacket too dull, his green trousers faded.

"Excuse me," said the man, "I was wondering if I could ask you to sign something for me."

Hugh would never get used to this. He laughed. "I guess you already have. Sure."

The man took a pen from his pocket, an old fountain pen from the looks of it. He handed it to Hugh. As Hugh took it, the plunger on its side pricked his hand. He winced.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said the man, quickly taking the pen back and dropping it into his jacket. "I'm sorry to have bothered you." And with that, he turned and walked away into the crowd.

"Hey! Didn't you want—?" said Hugh, following him. But the man walked intently away. Puzzled, Hugh decided to find the others.

"Hey, Fleur," he said, joining her, "where's Simon?"

She gave him a disgusted look and pointed to the dance floor. Simon was involved in a complicated, showy dance with a woman. She had a cute face under a curly bob of light brown hair. Her body, in contrast, dressed in a bright trumpet of a skirt, was lithe and sexy. She moved almost as well as Simon did.

"Do you want to dance?" Hugh asked, trying to diffuse her mood.

"Are you kidding? I suck. I don't remember you being a particularly good dancer, either."

"Okay," he said, not willing to let her sulk, "how about eating? I bet you can eat." The moment the words passed his lips, he realised his mistake, saying this to a woman who worked hard to fight the shape her body naturally wanted to assume. "I—" he blurted.

She saved him an explanation by punching him in the stomach.

Chapter 11

The car's brakes squealed as it shuddered to a halt. By the time it stopped, the chrome bumper was well past the spot where Janine had been standing. But Frank Hardt had been there in time, jumping to scoop her up in his arms and heave her out of the way. He held her close as they fell to the ground on the other side of the street. For once his fat little body was right for the occasion: the girl was frightened but unhurt.

"Janine, get away from that man," yelled Janine's mother, a tall woman in a blue house-dress, crossing the street waving with her cigarette. The police would never lay a charge for tobacco possession in this neighbourhood. For one, the residents had no money, and then there was the matter that everyone here smoked. Frank hated the woman already; smoking around the girl was just the first of the ways he thought her unfit. He enjoyed holding onto the girl's hand for a second as he set her back on her feet, imagining that she was his.

"But Mom, he saved me from the car," said Janine. Frank fancied that she was smarter than her mother.

"Yes, and we should thank him, but you shouldn't let him touch you."

"Uh, excuse me," said Hardt, "but I'm standing right here. I can hear you. Besides, I'm not the one she should be afraid of. What kind of mother lets her children play in the street?"

"I can hear, too, you know," said the girl. "I was looking for my kitty. Felicity has been missing for three days, and I know she's still somewhere close, 'cause she'd never go away."

Go away like your mother's boyfriends, you mean, thought Hardt. Felicity. That's clever, he thought, a play on the Latin for 'cat'. She's a genius. And her mother is a dolt. She should be taken better care of. Someone should get rid of her mother. Someone should—

He checked himself. Maybe someone should, he thought, but it wouldn't be him.

"You should keep a better eye on her. She's a very special girl," he said to the monster-mother.

"Look you creep, don't tell me what I should or shouldn't do with my daughter!" The mother pointed with two fingers, her cigarette at a perpendicular. She whipped the fingers toward the daughter, about to make a point. Janine looked up with big eyes, eyes that said she didn't like to hear yelling. The mother's hand dropped. "I'm sorry, Mister. I shouldn't have — I'm just worried about my daughter. You know this isn't the best neighbourhood to raise a kid in. But that's no reason not to be—"

"Don't say it!" said Hardt, wincing.

"What?"

"Nice! *Nice-nice-nice!* Don't be nice to me! Dissembling Jezebel! At least when you were yelling at me you were telling the truth! You don't care, you don't want to know me. You're just another liar, another fake, just another—" he kept speaking as he turned away and headed up the stairs of his building, but Janine and her mother couldn't hear what he was saying. It didn't seem to be directed at them anymore, anyway. They looked at each other and held hands as they crossed back to their side of the street.

~

He hung his coat on a thick metal hook by the door. It had to be a sturdy hook, since his jacket was usually weighed down with weapons. He ran a hand through his thick black crest of hair. The day was hot, and the oil in his hair slicked his hand uncomfortably. He went to the sink to wash the hand, and had to move a pot and several

glasses to do so. He knocked his toothbrush from its perch on a glass into the mess and cursed.

He moved to the thick curtains and opened them a crack, letting light seep into the room. He peered across the street, happy that the mother was nowhere in sight. *Phoney*, he thought, *covering the world in a nuclear winter of icing sugar. Nice. The big lie.* The only thing worse than 'nice' was 'cute'. *Cute like Felicity.* Already the mother was cauterising the girl's burgeoning intelligence by getting her fixated on cute things. Well, the girl would soon be building a little character, getting some texture.

Felicity reared up on the kitchen table with open jaws and upstretched claws. She stayed that way, holding the pose that Frank put her in when he'd stuffed her. It was hot in the apartment, and he was anxious to do it before she got smelly. Well, part of her did smell. He should really throw out the bag of garbage under the sink, he thought.

There was a knock at the door. Frank yipped in fright, then composed himself. Only one person ever visited him. He considered ignoring the intrusion, but this conversation needed to happen if he was going to get his money.

He unlatched the door, already speaking. "Hello, Doctor Karst."

"Hello, Mister Hardt," she said, stepping into the apartment. She made a sour face as she smelled the air inside. The hand-printed silk scarf around her neck slipped over the shoulder of her cream suit jacket. She put it back in place as she walked further in, looking for a place to stop. She wouldn't risk touching the furniture. Even leaning was questionable. She spotted the rampant cat corpse on the kitchen table and gasped, then covered her reaction by pretending to hiccup from lunch. She was worried about being in here with him, but felt confident that she could play him successfully. She faced Hardt, clasping her hands. "How are — sorry. Forget that question. We'll skip the niceties and get right down to business."

His face slackened with calm. She understood. "Thank you, Doctor."

"Things in Costa Rica," she said, pausing to create a vacuum that would suck out his explanation.

"Yes, Ma'am, things didn't go as expected. There were some accidents."

"I'll say, you hideous little toad! My head researcher is dead!" The scarf slipped again.

"But I destroyed the facility," he protested.

"Yes, that's true. Rudiger's work there is finished. And because of that, you'll still get paid." Back went the scarf.

"Yes," he said, "when will I get my money?"

"Well, Mister Hardt, things just got much more complicated, didn't they?"

"Ma'am?"

"Clones, Mister Hardt, there are two human clones out there!" She indicated the window, though from here there was no visible "out there".

"But they're not part of Doctor Rudiger's work. They're not animals."

"No, they're not animals. But they *are* part of Doctor Rudiger's past work, and that work implicates me. To think that one of them was working for him."

"But he was trying to destroy the facilities, too," Hardt said, then realised he should downplay the man's role, in case it might affect his pay. "Your researcher led me to believe he was working for you."

"He was, although he wouldn't have known that."

"Well, he worked for you once. Why don't you just call him in again?"

"It's not that simple, Mister Hardt. Those clones are very dangerous creatures. And I don't know what happened to the man I used to work with, but Rudiger isn't him anymore. He's had access to one of the clones, too. That's very bad."

"What's wrong with them? Are they going to go crazy like his animals?"

"No. But their genetic makeup, if the wrong conditions presented themselves... Well, I'm not going to try to explain it to you, but it poses a significant threat to the public." She headed for the door. As she headed out, she turned back to Hardt. "You have to kill them."

"No!" he sputtered. "I don't kill people!"

"*Anymore*, Mister Hardt," she said, her expression flat, "don't forget the 'any-more' part. You'd better find your way back to it. Picture them as little bunnies or whatever you need to do, but kill them. There must be nothing left of them to study or dissect or probe, just like the animals, only this time moreso. They were an abomination in the first place, and they were never meant to come to term. If you do this, I will pay you double. And if you don't, you'll get nothing."

"That's not fair! You can't—"

"Can't I? What are you going to do, Hardt? Turn me in to the Better Business Bureau? You're an *assassin*, Frank. Assassins don't get much sympathy from the authorities." *Okay*, she figured, *he got the message*, now it was 'good cop' time. "It's important work you're doing, Mister Hardt. You'll be helping a lot of people." She smiled, wrapped her scarf over her head, tied it under her chin, and left.

Hardt clicked the latch into its locked position. Karst had him, and he didn't like that. How could he bring himself to do what she'd asked?

Maybe he'd go out this afternoon and treat himself to some goldfish to play with. That would make him feel better.

Chapter 12

Simon handed his visitor's badge to the guard in the studio's security booth. The man smiled and nodded, giving him a little two-fingered salute. Hugh handed his badge to the man, adding a "goodnight" to the gesture. The man nodded again.

They stopped on the sidewalk outside. "So," said Hugh, "what are you doing now?"

"Well," said Simon, "I was going to go home. Why?"

"I dunno. I just got this idea into my head."

"What is it?"

Hugh crumpled his jacket in his hand. The late afternoon was too warm for wearing it. "I was thinking of going home. Like, home, to see my mother. I keep thinking about her. This has all happened so fast, I haven't had a chance to talk to her. Haven't you been wondering, you know—?"

"Yeah. If we're clones, then who are our mothers, right?"

"Right. I mean, they're still our mothers, aren't they? It's not like we came from a lab. We were both born at the hospital, at the same time."

"Well, except I'm five hours older," added Simon. He looked away down the street, then back to Hugh. "Wait a second. So I can't be a clone of you. You weren't born yet."

"Ha," laughed Hugh, "I've been thinking I was a clone of you. And where does my dad fit into this picture? My God — maybe he's not my father."

"No, Hugh, he's not."

"But maybe he is, and he's your dad, too."

"We need to talk to our moms." Simon stopped to consider the idea. "How were you going to get there?"

"Uh, well, I was kinda hoping you'd want to go."

"Me and my car."

"You do still have that great car, don't you?"

"Uh-huh," said Simon, smiling, "but I don't have it here. It's at home. I can't afford four bucks a litre for gas, so I take Fleur's electric. But it's no good for long drives."

"So we go pick up your car, 'cause I think we can afford the gas."

"Yeah, well, that's the problem. If we go to my house, then—"

"Fleur," said Hugh.

~

Simon asked the cabbie to drop them off on the street, not to pull up the driveway. Simon gestured for Hugh to be quiet. Hugh eased his door shut and pressed it closed with two hands.

The lights on either side of the house's front door were lit. Bluish light flickered off the living room curtains; Fleur was watching the hotbox.

"I'm going in to tell her where I'm going," said Simon as they walked up the driveway.

"She'll love that."

"Come on, it's not that bad. I'll just tell her, and we'll go."

"Sure, sure. Want me to get the car started?"

"Did you get your license in the past five years?"

"Don't be so smug. You only passed the written test because I tutored you," said Hugh.

"Too bad I couldn't lend you a bit of coordination for your road test."

"Hey, I was just doing my bit, ridding the world of one dumpster at a time." Hugh laughed at his own expense. "Good luck."

"It'll be fine."

Hugh sat in the car. The dusk air was cool, and he felt relieved: the atmosphere in the city had been thick and he struggled with his cough all day.

A few minutes later, Simon emerged from the house with a gym-bag stuffed with clothes. "Yup, it's fine. Let's go."

"Really?" said Hugh, incredulous. "Great." He followed Simon to his squat blue car with the chrome ramjet grille. Maybe this would be okay, he thought, maybe Fleur had given up the idea that he was a threat.

The front door of the house swung open and Fleur stomped out in leggings, a T-shirt, and slippers, a pile of clothes in her arms. Simon had the car in reverse, but slowed as she approached.

Her voice increased in volume as she spoke. "I don't think you've got enough there, Si. You should take more, 'cause you won't be coming back here for a long time!" She stuffed the clothing through his open window.

"Okay, okay, hon'," he said, "I'll give you a call tomorrow, and we'll talk about this when you've cooled off."

"Like hell you will!" she said, banging on the roof of the car. Simon pushed the gas pedal, and the car pulled away from her, causing her to stumble. As they turned onto the street, Hugh saw her thumping her fists on her thighs as she screamed in aggravation at Simon.

Hugh couldn't help himself. He smiled and gave her a wave.

~

Simon drove fast along the highway. Both he and Hugh enjoyed the rumble of the car's engine as the city's skyscrapers hunkered down to a crouch on the horizon, skirted by a yellowy-pink haze of smog.

"Do you remember when we were eighteen and we took that road trip to my cousins' place in Alberta?" asked Simon, resting his hand on the wheel and smiling.

"God, that was awful, the car dying, then sleeping in it at that gas station, only to find out in the morning that they couldn't fix it."

"Then when we got there my relatives put us up in that mouse-infested trailer behind the house."

"But, still, we had a good time staying there together," said Hugh.

"Yeah." Simon laughed, but then looked at Hugh, serious, "But don't get any ideas, okay? I mean, it's nice to hang out again, but I'm married to Fleur now, so there won't be any — you know."

Hugh looked at the road ahead, his face inscrutable, hard. "I know, Simon. I wasn't thinking there would be." Looking out the side window, he took the phone from his pocket and dialled his mother to tell her they were coming.

~

Simon angled the little blue wedge up the alley and parked in the small lot behind the townhouses. As they got out of the car, they looked up at the long row of drab brown brick buildings. The decor of the small wooden porches was the only feature that distinguished one from another. A moulded plastic playhouse dominated one, another held two bikes, dropped, Hugh guessed, at the call of "Supper" or "Bedtime". Hugh's mother's porch teemed with carefully-arranged flower boxes. Simon's mother's had a glass-topped table, on which sat some empty beer bottles and an ashtray.

Hugh and Simon walked back up the alley, rounded the front of the building, and walked up the first concrete tile walkway. Hugh's house was the first from the alley, Simon's the second. It had been the best feature of their childhood, having a best friend who lived next door. There were lots of other kids their age who wound up in these townhouses, too, usually with their mothers after a divorce.

"I'll get my mom, and we'll come right over," said Simon, heading toward the painted metal door of this mother's house. "That is, unless you want to talk to your mom alone."

"No," said Hugh, "I'd like to see your mom again, and I'm interested to hear what she has to say about all this."

"Okay, we'll be over in a minute." Simon paused on the doorstep and looked at Hugh, smiling. "This is weird, eh, being here together again?"

"Yeah. But good weird," said Hugh, smiling back. Simon went inside. Suddenly their past wasn't lost, but here again. It was an awful lot like a dream, being somewhere familiar, only with another layer superimposed on top of it. He came home from time to time, but knowing Simon was next door was like standing in a moment twenty years past. But now he had these new layers from the intervening years — awareness, experience, hurt, triumph. It was the super-power they'd always envied in grown-ups: the power to determine your own life.

He realised that the adults he'd known as a child, his mother and teachers, were younger than he was now. They must have felt just as confused by and powerless over life. He appreciated anew, then, the good job they'd done of faking it so that everything made so much sense. He longed for someone to give him a reality like that again, one that followed its own rules.

He knocked on the door, then let himself in with his key. "Hi, Mom, I'm home."

~

The four of them sat in Hugh's mother's living room. It was a dustless museum of porcelain figurines, with a light beige shag-pile rug studiously combed with a special apparatus Hugh remembered fondly. He could picture his mother at work before they arrived, raking her living room, worrying herself over details no one else would see.

"Could you get me a diet pop, Helen?" asked Rosalynn. She and Hugh's mother had been friends since they were children, too, so all of Helen's strange house rules made sense to her, and she felt at home in them. When Helen brought her the drink, Rosalynn knew to use a coaster, and even where to find an everyday coaster instead of the good 'company' ones.

"So," said Hugh, trying to get started. He shifted in his seat to look at his mother. "I guess you've probably seen us on the hotbox." He nodded at his mother's set in the living room, a large, wooden-framed number that he doubted she ever used. To her it was an essential part of a home, but now that Hugh was grown, finished school, and gone, it was more of a table than anything else, with a doily on top that was home to a porcelain boy and girl walking under the boy's umbrella. But from the way his mother cast her eyes to the floor, she'd obviously heard the news about them. She must have been grilled at work already, and Hugh felt bad she'd had to endure that, but that took a back seat to his own hurt. He allowed his own childish petulance to go unchecked, soaking his mother in a deluge of guilt. "We figured it was time to hear your explanation."

"Oh, come on," said Rosalynn, "don't be so hard on your mom, Hugh. It wasn't even her idea."

Hugh pulled out his heavy paper 'long-form' birth certificate. "You told me my father ran away when I was two, Mom. You said that he had some traumatic accident at work and suffered from 'fugue' — some kind of amnesia that made him run off and start up a whole new life without remembering his old one with us." He held out the certificate. "What the hell was that about? My father never ran away. There's no father listed here. I don't even have one, do I?"

Hugh's mother, still looking at the floor, shook her head.

"But when I was fifteen, a man came to stay with us for the summer. You said he was my father, with his memory back. I was so happy. And whenever he couldn't remember something, you said it was a side-effect. He was so nice, though, and you seemed so happy, that I didn't question it. Then, at the end of the summer, I came home one day and he was gone. You said it was 'the fugue' again. Who was that guy?"

Helen looked up and spoke, barely audible. "He was my b— My b—"

"Oh for heaven's sake, Helen! You'd think he was her pimp, the way she's going on about it. Hugh, he was her *boyfriend*. She was too embarrassed to tell you, or anyone else, because she was afraid of what people might think of her. First she had a baby by herself, then she caught that looker of a boyfriend. Personally, I think she's a hero."

Hugh's jaw hung open.

Helen spoke: "I didn't want anyone to think that I was, you know, *that* kind of girl."

"*That* kind of girl," said Rosalynd. "You mean a girl like me."

"You just told me I didn't have a father," said Simon to Rosalynd. "I always figured you meant 'none worth mentioning'. But from time to time I played around with the idea that I was a virgin birth."

"Oh, honey," said Rosalynd, "you may not have had a father, but you were certainly no virgin birth." She cackled to herself, then burst out guffawing, looking to the others to get them in on the joke. They weren't laughing.

Rosalynd stood up and crossed the room to the dainty liquor cabinet. She opened it, took out a bottle of rum, and spiked her drink heavily. "Look, Hugh, don't blame your mom. I put her up to it. We were both just out of university and strapped for cash. I found this ad for a fertility study that promised to pay us very well if we went all the way through it." She took a big gulp of her drink. "Imagine our surprise when we found ourselves up the stick. People started asking, but what were we going to say, 'A company made us pregnant'?"

Simon looked puzzled. "But you decided to go through with it."

"The company said it was normal, that it was a side-effect, but they were going to take care of it," said Helen. "But when the time came, we didn't want them to do it."

"Boy, were they pissed at us!" said Rosalynd. "Especially that doctor."

Hugh's heart fell into his stomach. "Let me guess. His name was Rudiger."

The mothers looked confused. "No," said Helen, "it was a woman named Karst. She tried really hard to find us, but the clinic got closed down first because of a new law or something."

"It was the Asilomar Treaty," said Hugh sitting back in his chair, sighing and throwing his head back on the cushion, relieved that Rudiger wasn't responsible for his being.

"It doesn't really change anything in the end, though, does it?" said Simon. "I mean, you still had us and raised us on your own."

"The people at the clinic said that even if we tried to have you, you'd probably never live," said Helen.

It made sense. Hugh had been doing some reading, and it seemed that the adult cells used to create new offspring often contained a lifetime of genetic errors, and that made for some pretty unhealthy clones. Maybe they'd been lucky. Or else this Karst was smart enough to find her way around the problem.

Helen stood up and crossed the room to Hugh. She opened her arms. He stood, and she hugged him. "I'm so happy you finally know the truth," she said.

"Simon's right," he replied, "I already knew the truth: you're my mom, no matter what."

Rosalynd stood up and hugged Simon awkwardly in his chair. When they let go, she fanned a hand at her eyes, her lip quivered, and she made blubbery crying sounds. Then she dropped her hand and rolled her eyes. "Thank God that's finally over. Now let's go next door. I've got a case of beer, and we can put some steaks on the barbecue."

"You have real animal meat?" asked Hugh. "Where did you get that?"

"Simon's cousins live on a farm, remember? I have connections." She downed the rest of her drink, and they went next door.

~

The cab picked Simon and Hugh up from in front of Hugh's apartment building. Fleur hadn't answered any of Simon's messages and hung up whenever he did reach her, so he stayed with Hugh when they came back from seeing their mothers. As Simon slipped into the cab, he noticed how much the springy back seat felt like Hugh's sofa-bed. It was about the same size, too, he thought.

Hugh told the driver the name of the studio they were headed to and the cab accelerated onto the street. Hugh fingered an advance copy of the cookbook they'd been asked to endorse. "My God," he said, "here's a breakfast shake that's supposed to help your memory in the morning." He leafed through several more of the book's glossy pages. "I thought the whole point about us was that we were genetically *made* the way we are. Besides, I would never curse anyone with remembering things the way I do."

"Turn back a couple of pages, here," said Simon, grabbing the book. "Here's one that's supposedly mine, a lentil 'meat'-loaf that helps your endurance. 'For sports, for fitness, even for your love-life'."

"You talking about love-life endurance. Now that's funny," laughed Hugh.

Simon shot him a look, then looked at the rear-view mirror. Sure enough, the cabby had recognised them and was listening in. "Hugh," he said through clenched teeth. He punched Hugh in the leg.

"What? It's tr—"

Simon punched him again. He nodded in the direction of the cabby. "Fine," said Hugh, "I won't mention it again." They sat in silence for another block. "But maybe it's not your fault," said Hugh. He turned to face Simon, put a knee up on the seat, and lowered his voice. Simon fidgeted, taking a quarter out of his pocket and flipping it over his knuckles. "I read this old book that tried to explain all of our behaviour in terms of genetics, and it's had me thinking. At one point, they thought this Xq28 region of the X chromosome had some influence on sexual preference. So this Doctor Karst, maybe she didn't want us to reproduce, but she didn't want to damage us by making us sterile or anything, so she tried to make us just not want to have sex. Maybe that's why I like men. And maybe you were meant to, too, but it didn't quite work. So you like women now, but things are kind of, well, broken."

"Hugh, you're insane."

"No, Simon," said Hugh, "it's no more insane than the fact that you can do that quarter trick without even thinking about it, or that I could recite every word of the Bangladeshi national anthem to you. This whole thing is insane. But this," he said, picking up the cookbook, "this is just stupid." He shook it roughly, and started rolling down his window.

"They'll pay us ten thousand a piece to put our names on it," said Simon.

Disgusted with himself, Hugh put the book back down instead of throwing it out on the street. "I'll think about it," he said, "but no promises."

The cab pulled up to the station. "My turn," said Simon, pulling out a folded wad of bills.

Inside the station, various staff members shuttled them about, preparing them for the day's taping. Several of them knew the pair by name now. Hugh had no choice but to know theirs.

"Hi there—" Simon began saying to an attractive intern. He elbowed Hugh.

"Sharon," said Hugh.

"Hi there, Sharon!" Sharon smiled and waved as she walked past.

"Who is she?" asked Simon.

"She was the floor manager on the show we did here last week. But then she switched departments and was replaced by this one, Darren," he said, indicating the young man approaching them with a clipboard.

"Hi there," said the youth, his eager tone making Hugh cringe, "today's show is a great one. It's all about special people."

"What does that mean?" asked Simon.

"Well," the manager chose his words carefully, "people who were born and grew up to live great lives despite the odds."

"We're not talking dwarfs, are we? Tell me there aren't going to be any dwarfs," said Simon.

"No. No, we couldn't get any dwarfs. Or Siamese twins. But we did find a pair of sisters who are incredibly obese."

"Oh, God," said Simon. This was not what he'd planned for his new career. Hugh had no particular attachment to that, and found Simon's discomfort funny.

"But they do sing very well," said the manager. Simon squirmed more. "In fact, they've just released an album."

Simon buried his face in his hands. Hugh, still smiling, asked, "Who else is on?"

"We have a Professor Lamont on the show to discuss these unusual biological developments. I believe you've met him before." Hugh nodded. "He was quite anxious to see you again."

The floor manager left them, giving them their ten-minute call. Simon moaned that they needed an agent. Hugh wondered if he was going to have to stop making these appearances, or if interest in them would die out on its own.

The show started, and after a brief warm-up, the host brought on Professor Lamont to set up the show, talking about "nature's levelling effect" and how the odds were against truly unusual biological events happening. "Unless, of course, they're brought about deliberately," he said. The host used that segue to bring on Hugh and Simon. Hugh guessed that the obese women were considered more of a show-stopper than they were.

The host introduced them, followed by a clumsy moment in which they said that they'd actually met the professor before on another show. "I've been wanting to talk to you," said the professor. "The day of our last interview, I suggested that you might be in some sort of race against your biological clocks."

"Yeah," said Simon, "because of our cells, the—"

"Telomeres," added Hugh, finishing Simon's thought, an old habit.

“Yes, well, I’m sorry if I alarmed you, particularly since it turns out that some other cloning methods used on mice and calves back at the turn of the millennium had the effect of not only rejuvenating telomere length, but extending it, giving the clone cells the ability to divide long past the normal mortality rate.”

The host jumped in to gather up the wandering topic. “So you originally thought that these men might die at an unusually young age, but now—”

“This research I uncovered suggests that it’s just as possible that they could live an unnaturally long time.”

Hugh and Simon looked at each other, happily surprised. The interview continued, but they were too distracted by the news to participate much. The host seemed more content talking about them rather than to them, anyway. Then she broke for a commercial. Hugh and Simon shook the professor’s hand gladly as he left the stage.

When the commercial break ended, the obese sisters came on and sang a cover of a popular song. Their rendition was pretty, their jowls quivering with the force of their bold vibratos at the song’s end. When they finished, the host joined them onstage, since the studio chairs were too small for them to join her. They called their father onstage, a tall, skinny man in a grey country-style suit, who was their manager, and “their biggest fan”, he said.

The music swelled for a reprise, and the father called Hugh and Simon up to join his daughters onstage. “Who knows?” he said, “maybe you could all cut an album together.” Simon bounded to the stage to join them with his soulful but tonally-flawed voice. All his pride vanished like a shadow under the stage lights. Hugh, who had perfect pitch, stayed put in his seat. He looked out at the studio audience, trying to gauge what they thought of his friend, his brother, whatever Simon was.

A face in the crowd struck him. The man’s thin face, though half-visible, whitewashed by the bright lights, was unmistakable: the man from the fashion show reception whose pen jabbed him. Hugh closed his eyes to think. He recalled the audiences of all the past shows they’d been on. Sure enough, every show after the first one, he could find him somewhere in the crowds gathered in his mind’s eye.

Hugh wasn’t at all surprised to find the man waiting for them when they left the taping.

“Came back for my autograph?” Hugh asked the man, who was standing outside the soundstage door.

“I’m sorry about that,” said the man, “but I had to confirm for myself that you were what they said you were.”

Simon joined them, and gave Hugh a “Who is this?” look. Hugh looked to the man, leaving a pause in conversation so he would announce himself. The man turned his axe-shaped face back and forth, looking at both the men, then realised his *faux pas*.

“Pardon me,” he said, “my name is Jerome Sprague. I’ve been following your appearances over the past several weeks.” He looked over his shoulder, down the hallway. “Could we go someplace more private? It’s quite important.” His voice grated on Hugh’s ears. The movement of his mouth contorted the scar-cleft on his chin and bent his beak nose. His pronunciation of the letter ‘s’ was the most disturbing, the way the air leaked from between his too-spaced, angular teeth.

Simon was uneasy, too. “Don’t we have that dinner to go to?” he asked Hugh.

“I’m serious,” said Sprague. “This is very important. Your lives depend on what I have to tell you.”

Hugh and Simon looked at each other. There was a degree to which they’d picked up their old ability to communicate wordlessly with each other. Despite what it looked like to others, it was normal to them, a simple reading of gesture and expres-

sion. Hugh tilted his head and pushed out his bottom lip: *Ehh, why not?* was what Simon read. Simon's eyes squinted slightly: *I'm not sure about this.*

The man grabbed their arms and pulled them through a battered swinging door, down a maintenance hallway. Despite his scrawny frame, he was very strong, and his excitement made him even moreso; he had something he was dying to say to them. "The blood sample I got that night at the reception," said Sprague, "confirmed that you're part of the same experiment as the rest of us."

"What?" asked Simon.

"We wondered if we'd ever find you. The records didn't show a termination date, so we hoped you'd made it. But many of us didn't. And many of us have been killed since."

"Who? Who are you talking about?" asked Hugh.

The man leaned close. His voice was still lowered in a *sotto voce*, but he practically shrieked with joy. "The other clones and I."

Chapter 13

"I'm sorry, sir— sir!" yelled Fleur at the small man. He turned back to look at her. "That transfer is no good. Please put five dollars in the slot, or I'm going to have to ask you to get off the streetcar." She was no stranger to this tactic, a rider quickly waving an old transfer, hoping she wouldn't notice. But she always paid careful attention: riders were not to be trusted. What she found especially annoying was how belligerent a "fare scoffer" could get, even though they both knew full well what he was trying. Fleur had no fear about confronting them, though, no matter who they were. She sat up in her springy seat, readying herself for battle.

This one gave in right away, though, taking a five dollar coin from his pocket and dropping it into the slotted metal column that held passengers' fares. Lots of people stuffed transfers into the slot, too, where they inevitably wadded up and got stuck. She saw them there through the column's little window; they'd sit there the whole shift, and it drove her crazy.

Thankfully, the cheapskate took his transfer with him as he sheepishly made his way to the back of the streetcar. Fleur pushed her foot down on the big accelerator pedal, and the streetcar pulled forward with an electric whine. She checked the mirror that looked back into the car and saw the little man sitting in the curved back seat, staring at her. His grey overcoat was far too heavy for such a hot morning. Fleur wore the summer transit uniform of a blue polyester shirt and shapeless grey shorts, and was already too hot. As the man sat, his coat bunched up around his neck, but he didn't seem to mind. He gave her the creeps.

~

Hardt didn't expect Fleur Williams to be so pretty. Pictures and hotbox broadcasts didn't do her justice. He'd learned more about her through Karst, who somehow had access to public records. The government kept a central record system that was as leaky as a lawn sprinkler. It contained all sorts of personal information, including marriage certificates and Social Insurance data, such as work history. That was instrumental in his finding Fleur.

The assassin had been keeping surveillance on Hugh's apartment in the days since Karst gave him the instruction to kill them. But they'd been tipped off or something and were missing. So the next logical thing was to search for any kind of relationships they might be in. *Love, thought Hardt, is weakness. You want to bring someone down, you find out what they love.*

Simon was married. There were some police records on the couple, complaints by neighbours about noisy, disturbing fights. But they were still married, as far as he could tell. The other one, Hugh, there was nothing on him. A string of jobs — none listed at present — but nothing of a personal nature.

With a few calls to the transit commission, Frank Hardt found out Fleur's route. Today she was driving the Queen Street car. Now he was on it, and he just had to talk to her. But she was so pretty. And she'd probably die, too, if the job went through. That would be a shame. So pretty, with that pale, round face, shiny dark hair, and a full mouth that held such a serious expression. She looked strong, and he liked that.

He entertained second thoughts. Maybe he wouldn't go through with it. Maybe he should warn them all.

~

They made the complete circuit. Twice. Still the little man sat at the back of the streetcar. There was nothing technically wrong with him riding all day, but it unsettled her.

On the third lap, Hardt moved up, seat by seat, as other passengers got on and off along the route. Finally, he sat in the seat across the aisle behind her.

Fleur reached down into her bag and dug past her lunch, down to the small canister of pepper spray she kept for such emergencies. She eased her hand from the bag and pushed the spray into her trouser pocket, then continued moving her hand up in an unbroken movement to the metal bar in front of her. She made an effort to keep her face blank.

"You're a good driver," said Hardt.

"Pardon?" asked Fleur. He spoke so quietly.

"I said you're a good driver. Some streetcar drivers are so jerky, like they're trying to make everyone fall on top of each other, the way they stomp on the gas and then the brake."

"Oh, uh," she stammered, not expecting this from him, "thank you."

"I know who you are."

Ah, she thought, *there it is*. She'd wondered when the crazy would come out.

"Really," she said, "well that's nice."

"You're Fleur Williams. You're the wife of Simon Williams, the famous clone."

"How do you—?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've been following the story. You must think something terrible about me. Here's this man riding on your car all day, not saying anything. It took me this long to get up the nerve to speak to you. I'm something of a fan."

"Yeah, well, the boys are becoming pretty popular."

"No. Not a fan of theirs, a fan of yours. I've seen you out with them. You always look so wonderful. But it must be a terrible strain, following them around."

The hardness of her face melted. *How could he see that?* How could he know what she was feeling?

"It's been difficult," she admitted.

"Always in his shadow, never knowing who might try to steal him from you," added Hardt.

"Yeah," said Fleur.

"So where is he now?"

"I couldn't tell you."

"No," said Hardt, "I can understand why you wouldn't want to do that. You must have all kinds of people approaching you."

"I don't mean that. I honestly don't know where he is. We had a fight and I kicked him out."

"I'm sorry. This is none of my business. I'm sorry if I've upset you any further. I can get off at the next stop if you like."

"No, no that's okay," she said. "Actually, it's a relief to have someone to talk to about it."

"Well, I don't have to be anywhere this afternoon, so I'm all ears."

Fleur thought the man had all the charisma of a garden gnome, but still she felt a strange kinship toward him. Somehow he unlocked all her frustration, and he listened very well. For the next two hours, she told him the story of her relationship with Simon, with all its joys and vexations.

"I'm about to finish my shift," said Fleur. "At the stop up ahead, I'm going to be relieved by another driver. So thanks for the talk. I really needed it."

"Wait," said Hardt, avoiding her eyes, "I have to admit, I do have an ulterior motive for talking to you."

"I figured you might."

"I need to find out where your husband is."

"Why?"

"I need to warn him. Someone wants to hurt him."

She stomped on the brake. Hardt's face hit the plastic partition beside him. She leaned out of her chair to stare at him. "Are you being serious? Is that true?"

"Dead serious," he said.

She took her seat again and sped to the next stop. She exchanged a few terse words with the new driver, picked up her bag, grabbed Hardt by the arm, and took him from the streetcar. Pacing the sidewalk, she asked him, "What should I do?"

"We should go someplace safe," he said, "like your house, and try to reach him from there."

"God, I'm so glad you found me," she said.

"Me, too," replied Hardt, smiling.

~

"So this doctor," said Fleur, "she's the one who wants Simon killed?"

"Yes," said Hardt, "and I had to tell you so you could warn him."

"God knows that two days ago I wanted to kill him myself." She looked at the little man with the big black hairdo who sat in her car. "I'm kidding. You know I'm kidding. I love him." She dug through her bag for her phone. "You're sure that this is Hugh's number?" she asked, indicating the slip of paper she had pressed up against the wheel. Simon tried to leave the number in a message for her a number of times, but she'd deleted the messages the minute she got them.

"Yes, it's his number. Of course I couldn't call, because I could be just anyone. I mean, I could even be working for her myself!" he said. He laughed.

Fleur laughed in response, then paused. She didn't know who this man was. Why should she do what he wanted? *Because Simon is in danger*, she decided. She dialled the number. There was no answer. She left a message, frantically trying to explain what she'd been told. "I have someone with me who knows all about it," she said.

"Why aren't you there? The minute you get this message, come home! Both of you — I don't care." She pressed the button to end the call.

And Hardt pressed a gun to her neck.

Chapter 14

Hugh sneezed.

"What's with you?" asked Simon.

"Oh, nothing, it's just—" and he sneezed again, covering his mouth with his hand. He wiped his hand on his trouser-leg.

The Canada Day proceedings on Parliament Hill were the most impressive event they'd been invited to so far. Hugh and Simon stood in the wings of the red-carpeted stage that had been set up for the occasion. A girls' gymnastics team tumbled and cavorted on the area in front of the stage for the delight of Prime Minister Davis, the audience, and the row of silver cameras that swung in a choreography of their own, tracking the gymnasts' movements. The prime minister smiled, no sign of real feeling on her face. She was bored, as this was the twelfth presentation in the show.

Hugh peered through a space in the curtains to find Sprague in the crowd. He stood in the second row, wearing a thin yellow polyester summer shirt, grey shorts, and calf-high socks — all of which looked awful on his fish-pale, skinny frame. It was Sprague's idea for them to come here. He promised to take them to the other clones, but he didn't think they should go just yet. He worried that they might be followed, which would compromise their safety and the safety of the others. When Hugh expressed his concern, Sprague pointed out to them that security would be better in the nation's capitol than anywhere else in the country that day. With a few phone calls, their inclusion in the event was easily arranged: they were still a hot media item.

Hugh sneezed again. His cold annoyed him now. He wondered how other people put up with this on a regular basis. His hand was wet again — it never occurred to him to bring a handkerchief. He carefully slipped his hand into his pocket to wipe it dry. He was about to meet the prime minister, and it wouldn't do to give her a slimy hand to shake. He felt embarrassed, like a child who'd wet himself. He'd never had to deal with this before.

They got their cue, and walked onto the stage as the gymnasts cleared away. The cameras swung around to focus on them as they approached the prime minister. The crowd cheered, and some held up signs. "We love you Simon!" said one. Another, held up by a group of screaming girls, read "Simon U R kewl". Hugh searched desperately to find one for him, not caring how it was spelled. There was one, toward the back: "Hugh rules!" He smiled triumphantly.

Prime Minister Davis shook Simon's hand, then Hugh's. Her grip was strong and sure. It was a happy day for the country, and she took responsibility for it with her presence. Everyone seemed content to treat her as an important figurehead, forgetting for the moment the scandals plaguing her stay in office.

Hugh smiled at her and kept shaking her hand, relishing the moment. Simon stood off to one side and raised his hands to greet the crowd. They cheered. Hugh came back to his senses seeing Simon, and wondered if it might be dangerous for them to stay out in the open like this. He let go of the prime minister's hand and joined Simon, shooing him off the stage. They were scheduled to leave in the prime minister's motorcade to begin a parade, and leaving struck Hugh as a good idea.

They slowed to pick up Sprague in the back of a motorcade car as they passed him. The awed expression in Sprague's dark little eyes made Hugh realise how much of this luxury he already took for granted.

"My God," said Sprague, "this is a living room." He sat on the opposite side of a large round wooden table from Hugh and Simon.

"Would you like a can of pop?" asked Simon, opening one for himself. "There's a cooler to your left, a hotbox right above your head, and there's a phone in your arm-rest — you can call home for free."

"I wouldn't dare," said Sprague. "We can't risk talking on the telephone, in case they might find us."

"Okay. Hugh, do you mind if I call your place and pick up the messages? Maybe Fleur has calmed down."

Simon picked up the phone. Hugh shrugged, and spoke to Sprague. "So, you all live together?"

"Yes," said Sprague, "some of the others need a bit of extra care. Not everyone turned out quite as well as Simon and yourself." Hugh blanched, wondering what that might mean.

"Oh my God," said Simon, his ear to the phone. "We've got to get home."

~

They picked up Simon's car in the parking lot by the old waterfront where they'd hidden it. The train ride here cost them a few hours, but they would still be able to make it home that evening.

"This is great," said Simon, "Fleur knows who's after us."

"Si, we already knew about Karst. Jerome here already told us that much."

Sprague leaned forward from the back seat of the little car, where he sat crumpled up. "So who's with Fleur that told her about Karst?"

"Maybe it's that woman you worked with in Costa Rica, Hugh," said Simon, looking from the road to him.

"You mean Nadine?" Hugh looked at his hands, troubled by the memory of Nadine's body sprawled awkwardly on the ground like a collapsed marionette. "No, it wasn't her. She didn't make it back."

"I don't like this," said Sprague, sitting back. "I don't think we should go."

Simon shifted into a higher gear. "That's too bad, 'cause Fleur's involved now. I've got to see her and hear what she's found out."

"Simon, don't take this the wrong way," said Hugh carefully, "but how can you be sure, you know, that she—"

"Oh come on. You're joking. Be sure that she doesn't want to kill me herself? Is that what you think? You just wait until we get there. Then you'll see."

~

Hardt put a wad of putty-like material in Fleur's mouth and pushed her jaw shut. It tasted like mint, and it was slightly hot, but cooling, and getting stiffer. Then he took a small white piece of plastic from his tackle box and put in between her lips. He pulled her to the mirror. "Isn't that sweet?" he said. "What a nice way to greet your husband."

She wore a big smile.

"I spent a few hours here before I went to meet you on the streetcar," he said, "getting the house all ready for when the boys come here. You have some really nice things. It's a much nicer place than mine. I hope you don't mind that I took some of your photos — just ones of you. I really do think you're pretty."

With her hands tied together, she couldn't reach around far enough to pull the pepper spray from her pocket.

The headlights of Simon's car illuminated the sheer drapes. She stood in the living room window with a false grin for them to see as they arrived. "I'm sorry I have to do this," said Hardt, backing away toward the back door, stepping over the small blue plastic barrels of explosives, the silver detonator in his hand. He'd placed barrels around the living room where she stood and around all the load-bearing walls in the

house. He stopped, cocking his head to look at her. She breathed quickly through her nose, her eyes frantic.

"Oh, I just can't," said Hardt. Fleur's cheeks raised with a real smile as she turned to face him. "I can't kill you, too. That wasn't part of the deal." Her eyebrows furrowed as he grabbed her and pulled her with him as he headed for the back door.

~

Simon opened the front door and looked inside. It was dark. "Fleur?" he called. No reply. He walked up the stairs to the right and tried to look around the living room. Fleur was nowhere to be found. Maybe she was playing some kind of a sexy joke on him.

No, he thought, *her voice in the phone message sounded pretty serious.*

He spotted dark round somethings scattered around the floor. *Those weren't there before*, he thought. A little red light lit up on one of the shapes. Then another light winked on the shape next to it, and the next, continuing on in a chain. He didn't know what he was looking at, but his body reacted for him, turning and bolting with a speed few could achieve. He bounded down all the stairs at once and leapt through the still-open front door, waving his arms madly at Hugh and Sprague, who were waiting politely on the lawn. They followed his lead as he sped past them, running to Simon's car on the street and ducking behind it.

The house burst like a brick bubble, fire pouring from the openings — the door, the windows, and the vanishing roof. Several bricks flew towards them, skidding off the asphalt with a chalky sound. One shot into the side of the car, impacting with a clang. Simon winced. The house then fell in on itself, one wall at a time curling in then dropping. When the blasts stopped, they got up and got into the car. Not wanting to risk being on the houseward side, Hugh climbed over the driver's seat as Sprague stuffed himself into the back. Simon got in and started the engine, and took one last look at the hole where moments ago there's been the house that he and Fleur bought.

He saw Fleur and a little man in an overcoat walking around the flaming ruin, giving it wide berth. The man held an arm tightly around Fleur. He seemed very upset when he spotted them in the car. Fleur looked happy about all this. She looked down at the man, then back at Simon. She smiled in his embrace.

"That's him!" yelled Hugh. "That's the assassin I met in Costa Rica, Frank Hardt."

Simon put the car into gear and drove away as fast as it would let him.

Chapter 15

Frank Hardt walked around the perimeter of the crater that only recently had been Fleur and Simon's house. Fleur, her hands now freed, picked the hardened dental compound out of her mouth, retching and spitting.

Hardt swore under his breath, and kicked a clod of dirt into the hole from which smoke and a few small fires issued. He turned to Fleur. "Now I'm going to get them. It has nothing to do with the money. That's twice now that he's done that to me, that Hugh one."

Fleur pulled herself up to full height, normally not much, but a foot more than Hardt could muster. She brushed off her plain houseclothes, a futile effort: Hardt's back yard hiding spot hadn't provided much protection when the house blew up, and they'd both been showered with sewage. "Fine. You take Hugh. But Simon's mine."

"What?" asked Hardt, excitedly.

"I'm sick of him. He's done nothing good for me, and as long as he's around, he'll just keep on hurting me. You saw him with his best friend there, not a thought about my welfare." She walked to Hardt's side and looked down into his face. "Let me help you."

Hardt's expression broke into a giant grin like it was opening shop. He couldn't believe his ears: this beautiful woman wasn't just tolerating his company, she was actually choosing it. *She wants to help me.* With only a confused nod and a happy intake of breath, he agreed. Sure it was dangerous and probably a bad idea. Working with others had never turned out well. But this woman, so attractive, so strong—

She was speaking: "Just one thing," she said, "if you stuff anything else in my mouth or try to tie me up again, I'm going to break your arms. That's a lousy way to show a girl you like her."

Hardt smiled and nodded some more.

Fleur's heart was returning to its normal pace. She wasn't sure what she was up to, but at least she'd convinced Hardt. What troubled her most was how convinced she felt herself.

~

"The speaker recognises the Right Honourable Margaret Davis."

The prime minister leaned her hands on the wooden railing in front of her. She looked around the vaulted wooden room. The House of Commons still impressed her, though the green padding, the intricate carved details, and the various coats of arms around the room were distinctly dated and stuffy compared to her ultra-modern law office back home in her riding. But every day she appreciated the fact that she'd made it here.

Though she knew the gesture looked like a gathering of power, she was actually leaning on her hands to steady herself. Ever since the Canada Day celebrations, she'd felt a bit fluish, a bit weak. *It isn't sunstroke, she thought, sunstroke goes away. Maybe I ate something bad at the wretched outdoor picnic after the parade, sun-spoiled potato salad or something.*

"Mister Speaker," she said, addressing the figure at the far side of the room who wore an antiquated black robe, situated between the two parties' halves of the room (there were other political parties in the country, merging and splitting like amoebas, but their fractious internal rows had cost them all their seats in parliament). "I don't see how we can continue to allow the raising, harvesting, and production of a crop whose sale our courts have declared illegal."

"Mister Speaker," said the leader of the opposition, a broad-bodied man in a tight-fitting navy suit. His usually red face was purple with agitation. "We can't simply

tell farmers to stop growing tobacco. Even though genetically modified tobacco seeds haven't been used in over a decade, they've conferred pesticide resistance to the current stock through microbes in the soil, and to insects and weeds themselves. Those farmers are obliged to keep using those plants — the pesticides they need to use on that land would kill off any other type of crop."

"I—" began the prime minister. She faltered on her feet, and the party member beside her grabbed her arm to steady her.

"Are you okay? Can I get you anything?"

"Water," said Davis, through her daze. The aide handed her a glass. She took it, and raised it to her lips.

Then stopped. She looked at the glass, cocking her head to the side, regarding it as if she'd never seen anything of the kind before. She turned it to catch the light. It glinted in her eyes. She looked blankly at the aide, as if he were as foreign to her as the water. She lifted the glass, and tipped it over his head. He sputtered, confused.

The prime minister smiled, looking back at the glass. She held it out, staring dumbly, then dropped it and looked at her empty hand. She opened and closed her fingers like pincers, laughing. The aide pulled out a handkerchief, mopping himself off while watching her, then told some lower-ranking aides to "get someone".

Seized by an urge, she forcibly pushed past the aide and her other party members and made her way to the aisle, then hopped over a railing into the centre of the room. She spun around in the clearing there, looking at the surprised faces around the room. She clapped her hands and hopped on the spot.

She kicked her foot into the air, sending a shoe sailing into the face of one of the opposition members. Enjoying that effect, she took the other shoe off with her hands and threw it as hard as she could toward the back-benchers. One caught it, as if he were a spectator at a ball game. Then he looked around, at a loss for what to do with one expensive, still-warm ladies' shoe.

In a move obviously not practised for years, but still remembered on some bodily level, the prime minister did a forward cartwheel, as if playing on a lawn. Her finely-tailored tan suit jacket and skirt bunched up around her head. She rounded out the cartwheel well and went on to try a handstand. Several of the aides and pages worked up the nerve to approach her and try to stop whatever it was she was doing. As one touched her, she lost her balance and fell, grunting to the side. A page broke her fall. She righted herself and straightened her jacket, then shook her head to clear the hair out of her face. She raised a hand in an *I'm fine* gesture, only to extend it and spin, slapping all the faces around her.

Davis made a break for it. She ran headlong toward the Speaker of the House. He cowered back in his seat, not knowing what she might do. She grinned viciously at him as she approached. Her dark lipsticked mouth pulled thin and taut to show the full complement of little teeth in her mouth. She opened them and howled.

The speaker ran from his chair. Davis grabbed the trim of his robe and pulled with all her might. He struggled to get free of the robe. When he did, they both fell to the floor. He got up and continued running. She put her prize around her and zoomed back and forth like a superhero, then skipped like Red Riding Hood. Then, bored, she dropped the robe and hopped up onto the speaker's chair. She hoisted up her skirt and made a face.

And defecated there.

When she finished, she laughed and clapped her hands in front of her, then hopped off the chair and ran for the hallway.

Davis made it to the pale marble stairs where the press were gathered to ask about the day's debate. As the first camera floodlamp went on, the prime minister

stopped in her tracks and stared, her mouth open. She collapsed and stayed still as if frozen until she was carried away by the ambulance attendants.

Chapter 16

The leaves looked like green butterflies in the headlamps as the car drove down the long driveway through the woods.

"How many other clones are there?" asked Hugh, turning around.

Sprague twisted his arm so he could lean forward between the seats. "There were twenty of us originally. Now there are just seven, including you two."

"What happened to the others?" asked Simon, still looking ahead down the driveway. The car rumbled as they drove the gravelled path, as if struggling to go slow.

"All dead. Six of the thirteen didn't make it past childhood. They were too... Well, let's just say they were underdeveloped. Another died in a car accident as a teenager. But the other six, I'm pretty sure they were killed as soon as they were discovered. Unfortunately for them, it's a remarkable group of people we have here, and the skills those six had got them noticed by the wrong people. I'm happy I found you both before the same thing happened to you."

"Yeah, me, too," said Hugh. He turned back to face the road, wondering if he would ever have done anything on his own to warrant discovery.

"Here we are," said Sprague as they reached the end of the driveway. Simon pulled the car around in the large round clearing in front of the building and parked. They got out of the car and stretched; it had been a long drive.

"This is beautiful," said Hugh, walking toward the house. The building was made of cedar, giving it a rich orange colour. It was low with a long flat roof that stretched far over the sides of the house, allowing for glassed-in rooms on either side. A second floor of glass rose in a slope from the back of the building. The whole structure was surrounded by a patio, which hung out over a steep drop into a ravine at the back.

"My 'parents' built this house. Now the other four and I live here. You're welcome to stay until we get things worked out safely."

"Thank you," said Simon. Hugh agreed with a small sound.

"Come inside and meet—"

Hugh stopped walking, suddenly disturbed. "Wait," he said, "the others— We're all from the same experiment. Does that mean that you and the people we're about to meet are all—"

"Genetically identical?" finished Sprague. "No. The experiment happened over a few years. The blood sample I took from you confirmed my suspicion: you and Simon are products of the last stage of the program, the culmination of it, in fact. Many of the things that had been tried unsuccessfully in these others worked in your genome." He faced them at the door of the house. "The people you're about to meet were created earlier in the program. To be blunt, we didn't turn out as well as you. So there are things about each of us that are, well, unusual. So please hold your reactions in check." He unlocked the door. "It's late now, so I'll save my explanations until morning."

"But you— you're not—" began Simon.

"Some of us blend in better than others."

Sprague opened the door, and they followed him into the house. The interior was just as beautiful as the exterior, full of handmade cedar furniture. The space was huge, with a sitting area to one side with deep chairs, a dining area to the other side, and a big stone fireplace in the middle. A hall opened on the left behind the fireplace.

A woman bounded down the hall toward them, beaming. Hugh thought she looked familiar. His eyes rolled up to one side unconsciously as he thought his way back to the last time he'd seen her. *Ah, the fashion show.* Simon had danced with her while he got to be Fleur's punching bag.

"Simon!" said the woman, throwing herself toward him. He caught her and spun her around, as if continuing the dance they'd done that night.

"You—? You're—?" spluttered Simon, happy and confused all at once. He put her down and pointed at her and at the others.

"Let me introduce my wife, Trineh," said Sprague. She looked at him and smiled, then quickly extended a hand to Simon, shook, then gave it to Hugh.

"So you're Hugh," she said. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Trineh's the only one to actually see all of the dossier on the experiment that made us. Much of it was lost when she was, when she—"

"When I stole it," she said, smiling. Then for a split second it seemed like she winced, but her smile flashed back quickly, her pained expression just a single black frame in an otherwise happy film. "I should get back to bed," she said. Her small apple face, framed with a soft curtain of nut-brown hair, took on a surprisingly official expression, yet didn't give up any of its cheer. "But I look forward to talking to you both tomorrow. Good night." Her slight frame turned and moved back down the hall with cat-like elegance, one foot gliding easily in front of the other.

Simon looked at Hugh, grinning. *God, thought Hugh, I've seen that look before.* She'd just been introduced as Sprague's wife (improbable as that match seemed), but that didn't do anything to dampen Simon's enthusiasm about her. Hugh pretended to not understand what Simon was trying to communicate, and looked back blankly.

"Let me show you your rooms," said Sprague, heading down the hallway Trineh had just used. Simon was practically skipping, thought Hugh. They passed an entrance to the kitchen, which shared a bar opening to the dining room. Further down was the bathroom, Sprague said, and then offered them rooms on either side of the hall. They thanked him and turned in.

~

Hugh woke up, finding himself deliciously crushed under a thick comforter and flannel sheets. He wondered for a moment where he was — not Costa Rica, not home. He thought through his groggy confusion for less than a moment and found the memory he needed close at hand. Air from the forest came in through the open window, keeping the room surprisingly cool for a summer night. *Why am I awake?* he wondered. A pressure in his bladder answered the question.

He rolled the covers off and got out of bed. He was about to leave the room, but realised he should cover himself some more, since he was only wearing underwear. He took his shirt from the wooden chair where he'd draped his clothes. It was a collared shirt, which looked foolish with underwear, but he supposed he wouldn't bump into anyone at this hour.

He opened the door and padded barefoot down the hall toward the door that had been pointed out as the bathroom's. He pushed it open, and jumped. Someone was in there with the light on, leaning close to the mirror, poking at his face. The other man got a start, too, as much from being caught at what he was doing as from being walked in on. His skin was blotchy and covered in red spots.

"I, uh—" said the man, turning to face Hugh. As the man turned his face, Hugh saw his other cheek. The skin there was peeled away, hanging.

"Oh my God!" said Hugh. "Are you okay?"

The man's face assumed a bored expression. "Yeah, whatever." He tried to push the strip of flesh back into place over the raw mush that was exposed. "Who are you? You're one of those two guys they've been talking about, aren't you?"

"Yeah," said Hugh, fixated on the man's face. Besides the one obvious wound, his skin was picked and tortured in a dozen other places. He might be okay-looking

otherwise, Hugh surmised, but it was hard to see past all the self-inflicted damage. His eyes wandered down to the man's arms where they extended from the black T-shirt he wore. They bore little slashes, scratches, and, yes, realised Hugh, those were safety pins stuck through the skin.

"I'm Lyle." He said the words out of obligation, as if just to get it out of the way. "So what's wrong with you?"

"Um, nothing," said Hugh. "I just have to go to the bathroom. Or I did." Then he realised that Lyle meant something on a bigger scale. "Oh. I remember things."

"Psh," said Lyle, dismissively, scratching at his arm, absentmindedly tearing out one of his pins and throwing it into the sink. "Big deal." He moved his way around Hugh-as-obstacle. "Night."

"Good night," said Hugh after him, slowly, but he was already gone. He turned to the spot where Lyle had been working at himself. He glanced at the sink just long enough to see the thick spots of blood or something there. He quickly turned the tap to wash it away. He put the toilet seat down and sat. He needed a minute to collect himself.

When he left the bathroom, he turned out the light. Still shaken, he knew he couldn't get back to sleep, so he decided to get a glass of water. He found his way through the dark, recalling the distance to the kitchen entrance. As he got closer, he saw a faint light coming from the room. He rounded the corner to see an immense figure hunkered in front of the fridge, sitting, it seemed, on folds created by her own body. She — was it a she? — turned to look at him. Her raven-black dyed hair stuck up in braids on either side of her head, and another braid poked forward from the front. She wore a white tank-top and camouflage trousers, both stretched to capacity by her pale white body, her flesh like a bag full of pizza dough. She pushed uncooked oven fries into her mouth. Around her on the floor were a plastic cake tray, a foil chicken pan, and two large Chinese food containers.

"Stop it," she said, fries falling from the corners of her mouth. "You're staring at me. It's because I'm fat, and I know it. You're oppressing me with your eyes." Then she stuck up her middle finger at him.

Hugh shook his head. "I just want a glass of water. You, uh, surprised me." He moved toward the sink, and started looking through the cupboards.

"To the right," the woman said, then resumed her eating. Hugh filled his glass, and decided to go back to his room, lest he risk offending her any further.

Hugh folded his clothes and put them on the wooden dresser: they were the only clothes he had with him. Then he sat on the chair and leaned back. He raised the glass to his lips and sipped slowly. He enjoyed the relaxed feeling that spread through him as he looked out at the night sky and forgot about what he'd just seen, about his troubles back in the city, sipping still though his lungs protested. He gulped, then gulped again. He was about to finish the glass, when he heard a pained cry. *Trineh*.

Hugh quickly put the glass on the floor (his mother present in his memory, telling him not to ruin the wooden furnishings), and leapt out of his room, down the hallway. A figure quickly moved past him, squishing him roughly into the wall like nothing more than a bug. It was a woman — she wore a shiny pink housedress. But her shoulders were far broader than his, reminding him of Simon in his lacrosse padding. They tapered down to her waist in an upended triangle. With each wide step her legs showed beneath her dress, muscled like a horse's. She rounded out of sight into *Trineh's* room.

Hugh reached the room and poked his head through the door, trying to balance concern and politeness. Sprague was there, holding *Trineh's* hand while the muscular woman scooped her out of the bed into her arms. Hugh felt a hand on his shoulder and turned, relieved to see Simon's familiar face.

Sprague looked up, surprisingly calm for the agonised expression on his wife's face. "It's all right," he said, "you can go back to bed. She'll be fine." The brawny woman nodded her head to confirm what he said and gave a tough smile. "I'll explain everything in the morning," said Sprague.

Hugh followed Simon back into the hall, wondering what he made of the other residents. Simon just patted him on the back and went back to his room. Hugh returned to bed, but even when Trineh's moaning subsided, sleep did its best to elude him.

~

Sunlight poured through the thin white curtains, which puffed intermittently as warm air made its way in from outside. Hugh sat up, surprised to find that he'd slept at all. He pushed himself up on his elbows, and images from the night before crept into his mind. Maybe he'd imagined it all; he did go through periods where he'd remember his dreams in such vivid detail that he'd mistake them for waking memories. Other times, his brain seemed to filter them out normally, or didn't put them in memory, or whatever it did. Sometimes his brain had a mind of its own.

He sat up further and breathed deeply. He coughed unconsciously; his mild illness no longer bothered him the way it used to.

He found a towel and facecloth on his dresser and scooped them up, put on his shirt again, and headed for the bathroom. But someone was already in there. *Oh no*, he thought, it was Lyle, and he'd have to bear witness to more of his self-surgeries. He leaned his head slightly toward the door, trying to listen. He heard a sound like running water, but not a tap, not quite so regular. It sounded like something gurgling from a person, but even a full minute later, now leaning closer to the door, he heard it continue. He was transfixed with revulsion as he tried to fit the sound to anything he knew.

"Morning," said Lyle, walking by. "She'll be in there a while. You might as well go back to bed." Hugh stared at him: this was definitely the person he met last night, but no sign remained of his scars. Even the torn patch was nothing but the faintest of lines, like a fingernail scratch.

"You—"

"Yeah, I know. Big deal. And you remember things, right? Oh, look, so do I." With that, Lyle left in the direction of the kitchen.

Feeling a growing need to go to the bathroom, Hugh tapped gently on the door. No response. He knocked.

"Just a minute," said a voice inside. It was the woman from the kitchen last night. Well, he figured, it made sense that it might take her a while.

He heard the toilet flush, and a moment later the door opened. A woman stepped out. She had the same three-braid black hairdo, but she was a fraction of her previous size. The tank-top and army trousers hung from her as she clutched to keep them from falling off. She stopped in the hall. "Oh, right. You're going to want to stare again. Well, have a good look." She raised her hands toward the ceiling, and her trousers fell to the floor. "Oh my, she's skinny!" she said, voicing Hugh's thoughts. He tried to act nonchalant, as if he wasn't just another one of the others she'd obviously met who thought she was a freak. After all, he could relate. She reached down and pulled up her trousers. The tank-top had covered her crotch, for which he was grateful; he'd rather not be wrongly accused of another crime.

"Suz?" called Lyle's voice from the kitchen.

"Excuse me," she said, "my brother calls."

Hugh took the opportunity to lock himself into the bathroom.

~

"Hugh," called Simon, spotting him. Hugh opened the screen door and walked out onto the patio. "I want you to meet our cousin Katy officially."

The brawny woman from the night before put down the axe she carried and waved from her spot on the grass. Simon stood near her with an axe of his own. The two had been hard at work chopping wood. Simon shone with sweat and looked happy.

Hugh waved in return.

Simon placed a log on the chopping block stump, stood back, and Katy easily whacked it in two. Then she set another up for Simon, who flipped the axe over his shoulder, then swung overhand with one arm, hitting the log squarely, rending it down the middle.

"Is it starting to come together for you?" said a voice behind him. Hugh looked to find Sprague offering him a glass of homemade cider. Hugh took it, then Sprague gestured toward some patio chairs. They sat.

"These people," said Hugh, "they're how Karst worked out how to make Simon and I."

"Each of us provided another piece of the puzzle, making it possible for you to come to be. So you'll have to forgive the others if they resent you a little."

"But I didn't have anything to do with that."

"I know Hugh, and they know it, too. But there's no one else to blame."

"Well how about Karst? Have you ever talked to her?"

Sprague smiled, showing his narrow, needle teeth. "She's the one who's been killing us. I don't think she's really up for rational conversation. Besides, she isn't solely responsible for the project. The dossier that Trineh found mentions someone else, another doctor."

Hugh closed his eyes, as if he could shut out what he knew about who that might be. He opened them again and looked at Sprague. "Trineh, how is she?"

"She's fine, thank you." Sprague looked at his bony hands. He laced them together and pushed them forward as if to crack his knuckles, but they didn't crack. They kept pushing forward, further and further. The fingers themselves seemed to bend. Hugh caught himself staring again. "Oh, I'm sorry," said Sprague, "it's just that the cartilage—" He sat forward in his chair. "You know that we've all been altered in some way, don't you?"

"I guess I figured something like that was going on. So why don't you give me the run-down so I can stop making a fool of myself with the others?"

"Katy there," said Sprague, pointing as she threw her axe spinning into a large wooden circle whose centre was mostly chipped away. Simon patted her on the back and picked up his axe. Hugh knew Simon would play at that with her all day. "She obviously has a lot in common with Simon — reflexes and stamina. When we found her she was being recruited by the women's Olympic swim team."

"Lyle can heal himself, right?"

"To put it simply. Human Growth Hormone was once thought to be the golden fleece of medicine, with its ability to regenerate tissue and preserve cells. Most of it is produced at night when we sleep."

"And Suz has some kind of enhanced metabolism."

"Exactly."

"Trineh is — she has — what is it?"

"She was the project's attempt to understand the immune system. She has cancer. Several different types of cancer. But she also has the ability to resist it indefi-

nitely. Her cells' mortality is skewed in such a way that many of her cells mutate and become cancerous. But they're offset by others that are practically indestructible." Sprague idly bent the finger that bore his wedding ring. "She's constantly dying. And yet she can't die."

The screen door opened, and Trineh stepped out. "Hi," she said, smiling, picking at a piece of bread.

"Hi," said Hugh. He felt awkward, and moved the conversation on. "And you? What's your thing?"

"Ehh, I'm part shark," he said, waving it off with a hand.

"What? You're kidding."

"It was a dumb idea. They were working with shark cartilage and its use in treating arthritis. Large sea mammals were becoming rare, so working the helpful genes into the human genome seemed to make sense. But it didn't work, of course."

"God, so what does this mean for you?"

He spoke as if reciting a grocery list: "I'm very flexible, I have a great sense of smell, I can withstand extreme cold, and I like sushi."

"Sushi — seriously?"

"Well, I was joking, but yes, I do like it a lot. Any kind of raw food is wonderful."

"And he has the most interesting features I've ever seen," said Trineh, sitting on his lap, stroking his face. He smiled, his thin, pointed face suddenly making more sense to Hugh. But *attractive*? He didn't see it.

"Ha!" said Simon. He hung upside-down from a high branch in a nearby tree. Katy held herself wedged awkwardly in a fork far lower down the trunk.

~

Sprague led the way upstairs. Simon and Hugh followed. "So you did genetics work, too?" asked Simon.

"Well, I was a research assistant. I guess I was trying to figure out why I was born different. Trineh was doing the same, and that's how we met. She has a better head for the work than I do, but she was always more interested in the implications of genetics on human lives. I prefer the lab." He pulled open the heavy metal door to his office. The cold air inside condensed into a fog as it met the outside air. The three stepped in.

"I can give you sweaters if you like," said Sprague, moving into the greenish room. The glass ceiling had been covered in a dark plastic film. Blue fluorescent lights illuminated his desk and the several other tables in the room. Papers, vials, and several small stainless steel machines covered every available surface. "Are you cold?"

Hugh and Simon looked at each other. "No," said Hugh. Simon shook his head.

"Of course," said Sprague. "Cold has never really bothered you, has it?" They shook their heads. "That makes perfect sense. They included *pseudomonas syringae* in your genome as well."

"Which is?" asked Hugh.

"An ice-nucleating agent found in deep-sea fish. You could never die of exposure. You can thank me for that. It came from my genome."

"We've got a bit of each of you in us, don't we?" asked Simon.

"I suppose you probably do, to some degree or another. But in you it all works in concert somehow."

"And it doesn't for the others, does it?" asked Hugh.

"No. It hurts us each in different ways."

"You're doing this because you want to cure your wife," asserted Simon.

"I want to help all of us."

"But your wife most of all, though, right?"

"I suppose."

Simon put down the glass pipette he'd been playing with. "You'd do anything for her. There's nothing wrong with that." Upset, he turned and left, heading back downstairs.

"Oh," said Sprague, "I was thoughtless. I'd forgotten about his wife."

"It's fine. I wish we could all forget about her," said Hugh. He spotted something across the room, a binder with a black woven cloth cover that was badly twisted and torn, revealing the cardboard underneath. It sat under a plastic cover. "Is that the dossier?" he asked.

"Yes, that's it."

"May I see it?"

"Yes, but I doubt you'll find it very interesting. The parts that mention you aren't there." Hugh held it reverently in his hands. "Well, except for one detail. It does mention your real name."

"Really?" said Hugh, short of breath.

"Yes. It's 'E77E'."

"Oh," said Hugh, looking down at the binder. He looked up. "And Simon's?"

"M55M'."

"Hmm, so we still don't know who came first." Hugh put the book under his arm. "Do you mind if I take this outside after supper and read it?"

"It's pretty difficult to decipher."

"I have a medical degree," said Hugh. "Besides, how many people get a chance to read their operating manual?"

Chapter 17

"Ouch," said Hugh. Trineh attached a vial to the needle she'd just stuck him with, then untied the rubber tubing on his arm. Blood spurted, slowly filling the oblong glass shape, which reflected the green light of the office. "What are you looking for?" he asked.

"I've noticed that you're sick," she said, "and that doesn't make sense. You're immune to every known illness. Sure there's different strains of colds and flus from year to year, but your system is more adaptable than that."

He worked very hard to stifle a sneeze so that he wouldn't jostle the needle. Then Trineh pulled it free and put a cotton ball against the tiny hole. "Hold that," she said, capping the vial with an orange rubber stopper.

"I can tell you why," said Hugh. "I've been sick since this geneticist named Rudiger attacked me in Costa Rica. I'm sure he was trying to kill me with whatever he injected into my neck. But instead I got sick."

"You think it was a virus?"

"Yeah. He was testing it out on locals. He said he'd figured out the biology of consciousness."

"What?" Trineh put down the blood sample. He had her attention.

"That's what he said. And it worked on them. I'm guessing he tried to give me an overdose."

"Which would do what? Destroy your consciousness?"

"I suppose."

Trineh's usually kind little brown eyes squinted with concern. "So your body managed to deal with it. I'm not sure how it's transmitted, or if it can be, but if it were to recombine with something in that system of yours—"

Pieces of medical school floated up in Hugh's mind like answers in a Magic 8-Ball. "It might become something new that no one has an immunity to." His eyes opened wide as he contemplated the possibility. He unconsciously patted his hair down and pulled it to one side. He left his hand on his forehead. "And it literally makes them lose their mind."

"Let's assume that it acts like a flu virus. Who have you come into physical contact with since this happened?"

Hugh blinked his eyes. He spoke slowly as he recollected the events since Costa Rica. "Physical contact? I kissed my mom goodbye. And Simon's mom. I shook hands with, uh, forty-seven, no forty-eight other people. And— Oh God," his mouth slowly opened, "one of them was the prime minister."

Trineh put a hand to her mouth and breathed through her fingers. She straightened her simple pale blue summer dress and collected herself. "I'll talk to Jerome, and we'll figure out what to—"

A tapping on the skylight overhead interrupted her. She and Hugh looked up, wondering what had managed to scamper up onto the roof from the trees. Hugh got up and cleared away some of the condensation to get a better look, then jumped back when he saw Simon's face looking at him. Simon moved his hand into the small circle of cleared glass and waved.

Hugh looked at Trineh, who smiled, charmed. She ran, half skipping, across the room to get the rod to wind the window open. "Get off there," she said loudly, but completely without scorn. When there was enough of an opening, Simon extended his upper body over the ledge and flipped himself into the room like a trapeze artist leaving a net. He smiled at Trineh, proud of himself. She beamed back and coyly said, "Hello there."

"Excuse me," said Hugh, picking up the large binder containing the project dossier. "I seem to have just become invisible." He pushed his way past Simon, and closed the door a little too forcefully behind him.

~

Hugh sat back on the patio chair and opened the dossier to the spot where he'd left off. He was having trouble concentrating. The project notes were as painfully dull as Trineh suggested from a technical standpoint, but knowing that they described the people around him rendered it fascinating.

He heard a giggling sound coming from the open skylight in the office. *Trineh*. Then he heard Simon laugh. Hugh felt his stomach clutch like a baseball mitt, but refused to look at the feeling he'd caught. Instead, he redoubled his effort to concentrate.

The clones were never supposed to come to term, but Hugh was surprised to learn that many of their predecessors had been allowed to live far into the second trimester, which was strictly forbidden by professional agreement, even before Asilomar made it international law. Grainy photocopied scans and pictures were interspersed amidst the long stretches of text and charts. Most of them made no sense to him, but some, when clarified by the accompanying descriptions, made him grit his teeth and squirm. *Those ones were lucky*, he thought, *not to survive like that*. And the others here with him, he felt awkward having such an intimate awareness of their peculiarities.

Lyle and Suz sat at a circular picnic table across the deck from him. They were supposed to be filling envelopes and processing requests from their mail order business, something they'd taken on to keep sane during their long stretches hidden away in the country. Instead of working, though, they otherwise amused themselves. Suz ate wedge after wedge of watermelon. Of all things, even watermelon stayed on her frame, adding to her daily metamorphosis. From the dossier, he'd deduced that she must need an incredible amount of calories to satisfy her hunger, but hadn't the ability to process the bulk, except during her daily bursts of high metabolism. She'd soon move from watermelon to something more substantial. Juice dribbled down her arm. She flicked her hand to clean it, then pushed her sunglasses further up her nose with the back of her wrist.

Hugh saw Lyle scratch wildly at the back of his neck, as if he had a particularly bothersome insect bite. But he didn't. Two days of watching Lyle attack himself suggested that he could feel the workings of his skin's constant regeneration. A small trickle of blood leaked from the scratched area when Lyle pulled his hand away. With a bored look on his face, he picked up a small, thin knife. He stood from the table and flipped it end over end, then caught the handle. *That's a Simon trick*. He must have been watching Simon and Katy. Lyle threw it a little higher, catching it after a few more revolutions. Hugh wanted to put his attention back on the dossier, but found he couldn't. He watched, riveted, as Lyle practiced the move. It was a bad idea to try and follow Simon's lead. Hugh had years of experience to tell him that; he'd fallen from his bike and from trees, been bonked in the head by whatever ball was the focus of the latest game Simon had invented.

Lyle's face screwed tight as he said, "Damn". He looked at his hand: the knife had lodged itself there. "Hey, look," he said, holding up his hand for Suz to see. The blade stuck out horizontally, glinting from the back of his hand. Suz gave a nonchalant shrug, not wanting to endorse his stunt.

He worked the knife back and forth to free it. As Suz had with the watermelon juice, he flicked the blood away to his side, spattering the deck. He held his hand up to the sunlight, examining it for damage that would need attention. He wrig-

gled his fingers, then closed and opened his hand, wiped it on his black T-shirt, and sat back down to concentrate on his work.

A loud peal of laughter erupted from the office. Hugh slammed the dossier closed, stood up from his patio chair, and walked towards the trees. He had no idea where he was going, other than somewhere out of earshot of the house. The blackflies and mosquitoes were thick in the woods, but they didn't bother him. He was sure the explanation for that was somewhere in the black binder.

Katy burst from the bushes ahead, startling him. She apologized, but continued on her run. She trained every day like this, it seemed, but Hugh wondered bitterly why the hell she was doing it. Not only would her genetic modifications show up in any rudimentary health test, he also didn't know who she'd compete with, since he'd read that she was neither entirely male nor female.

~

"Supper's ready," said Simon. Hugh looked up from his spot on the ground to see Simon's face against a backdrop of leaves. He stretched his legs in front of him, and found that his backside had fallen asleep. He marked his spot by dog-eared the corner of a page, put down the dossier, and stood.

"Hey, you're almost finished it," Simon noticed.

"Yeah. But I skimmed a lot."

"It's in there anyway," said Simon, reaching over to tap Hugh jokingly on the head.

"Stop it," he said, brushing away Simon's hand.

"What's with you?"

"Nothing. And it's true what Trineh said: we're not in there. The part about us is missing." He stooped to pick up the book.

"That's not the problem. What's up?"

"You, Simon. It's you." Hugh put the binder back down. It was too heavy to hold for long. He sighed, then spoke quietly. "I don't feel like talking."

"Well, you brought it up. What did I do?"

"Well, with Trineh. The way you're carrying on, it's just not appropriate."

"Hugh, nothing's happening with us. We're both married."

"But something's going on. You have to admit that."

"Okay, yes, I suppose we're attracted to each other, and under different circumstances, maybe something might have happened between us."

Hugh started pacing, kicking at the soggy undergrowth. "So why are you being so obvious about it, right in front of Sprague, right in front of—"

"In front of who?" said Simon, turning Hugh by the shoulder to look at him. "You?"

Hugh turned away. "I just hate you sometimes. You're never happy unless everyone within fifty miles loves you. But once they do, you don't know the first thing about what to do with it. That's why Fleur is so perfect for you: you're forever struggling to get her."

"Maybe," said Simon, "but that backfired, didn't it? Because now she's gone. And she looked pretty happy about it, too. I can't even phone the police, 'cause I don't want them to arrest her." He took a step into Hugh's path to interrupt his pacing. "But I don't think we're really talking about Fleur. Or Trineh."

Hugh felt ice water run through his veins.

"Just say it, Hugh."

Hugh eyed the ground. "I don't want t—"

"Hugh, it's okay. It wouldn't be the first time you said it."

Hugh looked up. "What?"

"You honestly don't remember what you said at my wedding, do you?"

"No, I told you. It's the one thing in my life I can't remember."

"What do you think it was, Hugh?" Simon had him locked in a stare.

"I probably said something derogatory about Fleur, didn't I?"

Simon laughed. "No." Hugh picked bark from the tree beside them and played absently with it. Simon knocked it gently from his hand. "You said that I couldn't marry her because you loved me, and I loved you."

"Oh," said Hugh, shocked, grimacing. "Uh, no, I definitely don't remember saying that. I— I'm sorry about that." Hugh hunkered down, then plopped himself backward to sit on the ground. He laughed.

Simon joined him, sitting next to him against the tree trunk. "It's not like I didn't know."

Hugh was still laughing quietly to himself. "I— God, all this while I didn't know. I thought I said—" His expression sobered. "I'm not embarrassed. I'm not. I just regret that I had to be so drunk to finally say it, and that it was too late for it to make any difference." He looked at Simon. "Could it have made a difference, anyway?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But I don't think—"

"Y'know," said Hugh, "it doesn't matter. It doesn't make any difference now. But I'm sure that neither of us has ever been as happy as we were back then, back when we were a — a whatever we were. Did we even say it? Were we a couple?"

"I don't know," Simon said emptily, then, with a touch more conviction, "Sure. Sure we were." He put an arm around Hugh's shoulder.

Hugh tilted his head onto Simon's arm. "You live on the horizon, Simon. I wonder if anyone's ever going to arrive where you are." They sat quietly for a minute, looking up at the shimmer of the waxy green leaves above that parted in random patches, exposing the brilliant sky. "If that's what I said in the middle of your wedding, I don't blame Fleur for not wanting me around. And I suspect you never explained it to her."

"Uh, no."

"Just as well. It's ancient history anyway, right?" Hugh straightened his head and pounded his hand into the soft earth. "But I can't forget. No matter what I do. Every minute that we spent together, whole days, I can play them back in this damned head of mine. You can't understand what that's like. Nobody does. And I can't imagine being any other way. The seventh grade, the summer we went to camp? It's all in my head, arriving in the hot old schoolbus. The day that you got in trouble for fishing in Lake Ontario." Hugh closed his eyes and smiled. "You were wearing cut-offs and a white T-shirt with long blue sleeves. Your hair was all long and curly. Sleeping at night in the cabins — I could tell you everything we said each night. Then came the day we left, all suntanned, and I went with you that afternoon to get your hair cut for school. It's in here," he said, tapping a finger against his head. "Our road trip out west, the first time you ever kissed me — all of it." He opened his eyes. "It's always calling me, trying to pull me back. And it's so hard not to go, 'cause that time usually seems better than whatever else is going on. Fleur kicking me out of your life was the best thing that could have happened to me. I wouldn't have done anything for myself if she hadn't. 'Cause you drive me crazy. I mean, crazy good and crazy bad. But crazy."

"That's not the first time I've heard that," said Simon, brushing his hand familiarly against Hugh's arm.

"Then all this clone business had to come up, and there's this stupid book," said Hugh, thumping it beside him, "missing the one part I want to read. I want to see it there in print. I've always felt it, and now it might turn out to literally be true." He laughed in spite of himself. "I know you're going to think it sounds cheesy. But maybe

we were made for each other.” With this, he leaned over and kissed Simon squarely on the mouth, then sat back against the tree.

With an arm still around his shoulder, Simon felt Hugh’s breath; it jagged as he struggled to not cry. Simon pulled him close. They twisted where they sat and put their arms around each other’s shoulders, hugging tight as if to squeeze out the years between them.

~

“We need to talk to Doctor Karst,” said Sprague, walking from the cottage. Simon kept his arm around Hugh as they approached him. Hugh wiped at his eyes.

“Isn’t she the one who’s trying to have us killed?” said Simon, who was presently more clear-headed than Hugh. “Why would we go see her?”

“There were two doctors who worked on the project. A second doctor, a ‘Dr. R’ is mentioned in the dossier.”

“My Doctor Rudiger,” said Hugh wearily.

“Yes. And I’m convinced that Karst is trying to destroy everything that they created together, and everything that Rudiger has created since. The attacks were limited to his animal experiments until you two showed up. I didn’t think this new assassin was after us.”

“New assassin?” said Simon. “That Hardt guy didn’t kill the others?”

“No. Katy had to— Let’s say we stopped the other killer before he murdered any more of us.”

“By ‘stopped’ you mean ‘killed’, right?” asked Simon.

“Yes,” said Sprague. “But I’d prefer it if you didn’t remind the others. It was an unfortunate, if necessary, incident, and it’s worked until now.”

“What’s her problem with us?”

“She seems to see us as some kind of an abomination. The animals—”

“Were unstable,” interrupted Hugh. “When they reached maturity, they went berserk. Rudiger formed their genomes from scratch, and got something wrong in the process.”

“But we’re not like that,” said Simon. “I mean, here we are all grown up, and we’re no more crazy than anyone else, given the circumstances. So, hey, I don’t care, blow up the animals. But why go after us?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” asked Hugh. “We’re freaks. No one born naturally would ever turn out like us.”

Trineh closed the screen door behind her as she left the cottage. “I don’t think it’s just that, Hugh,” she said, tapping a now-empty vial against her thumb. “I think she sees us as potentially dangerous. She knows that Rudiger got close to you, she knows more about your makeup than anyone, and she’s worried about what the outcome might be.”

“And should she be?” asked Hugh.

Trineh descended the wooden steps to join them. Her last step faltered, and her face tightened in pain, but she quickly recomposed herself. “This virus in you, this new thing it’s become, it’s very bad news.”

“Do you think she’s so committed to stopping Rudiger’s work that she’d help us?”

“That’s my idea,” she said.

“How far is she from here?” asked Simon.

“A couple of hours north,” said Sprague. “She lives on a farm. We’ve followed her there, just to keep an eye on her, but none of us has been on her land.”

“So who should go?” asked Simon. “I’m definitely going.”

"Me, too," said Hugh.

"Katy and Lyle," said Sprague, "they'll be able to help you if anything goes wrong."

"Thanks, though I doubt we'll need any help," said Simon.

"Just in case, then," said Trineh, "to put me at ease. I want you to come back safe." Hugh looked at Simon, then her. They were staring at each other. Noticing Hugh's attention, she added, "Both of you."

"Well, if she gets out of hand," said Hugh, "I suppose I can always sneeze on her or kiss her or something and give her this virus." He smiled, then looked at Simon. His smile dropped as he realized what he'd done: he'd given Simon the virus.

~

"Give me your phone," said Simon as he steered the car from the path onto the paved highway.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Hugh.

"Don't worry, I'll make a secure call."

"Who are you calling? Not Fleur."

"No, she'd probably just try to find out where I am so she could kill me. I'm going to call Mom to see if she's okay."

"Oh," said Hugh, digging through the glove compartment where he'd left the phone, "all right. And ask about my mom, too."

"Sure. How are you doing back there?" asked Simon.

Katy gave an uncomfortable, muffled sound in response from where she sat, one arm twisted in front of her, her legs tucked into her chest so she'd fit into the tiny space. Lyle whined.

"We'll trade seats when we're halfway there," said Hugh.

Lyle moaned.

"Hey, I called shotgun."

"Yeah," said Lyle in his now-familiar monotone, "but you didn't tell us about that rule."

"Well now you know," said Hugh, laughing quietly to himself, remembering how he and Simon always tortured those who didn't know their intricate set of rules. His laughter bobbed on top of the current of dread filling him as he contemplated their destination.

Simon, looking worried, left a message in his mother's in-box, saying that he was fine, he'd just left the city for a little vacation. He thumbed the phone off and handed it back.

"I'm sure everything's fine," said Hugh.

"Oh yeah, then call your place and see how you feel."

Hugh nodded, then dialed his mother's number, finishing with the button marked with a little key that would encrypt the call. There was no answer. "Mailbox," he whispered to Simon, now looking distressed himself. "Uh, hi Mom. Hugh calling. Things are, well, things are a little strange right now. If you get this message, you should go see a doctor, 'cause I, uh, I think I might have given you a virus. Of course, if you do have it, you might already be catatonic. So if you get this, give me a— Oh, wait, you can't call me, 'cause, well, I'm hiding. But then, you probably— Nevermind." He hung up and looked around, embarrassed, at the others. Then he called Directory Assistance for the number of a neighbour, called the neighbour and asked her to check in on his mother and Mrs. Williams. "There. Mrs. Lefler will look in on them. I told her to call an ambulance right away if anything seemed wrong." He cocked his head.

"Wait a second. Mrs. Williams, Mrs. Willard— Our mothers were never married. Those aren't even our real last names."

Lyle leaned forward, scratching his arm. "Don't think too much about all this clone stuff. Like, who did they get that cell off of? Why did they make me? It'll just drive you crazy." He sat back, and Katy grunted. "Does anybody mind if I have a smoke?" He pulled out an unmarked brown paper carton and a shiny silver lighter.

"Yes, I mind!" said Katy. "We're not all built like you, remember?"

Hugh turned in his seat, and said, "And we don't want the police pulling us over before we even get there."

"Fine," said Lyle. He tried to put his cigarettes back in his pocket, but Katy's broad arm was in the way, so he simply dropped the packet on the floor.

~

"There it is," said Katy, pointing through the cab of the car. She indicated a long dirt road banked with high grasses. A white farmhouse stood at its end with a roof like an old hardcover book set down to mark a page. A generous veranda stretched around the house, punctuated with white pillars and furnished with rocking chairs, old wooden kitchen chairs, and a decrepit sofa. An old barn rose in the expanse of backyard. Beyond the yard was nothing but miles of woodland. The sun crept behind the trees there, tinting the sky above, which was still light, but the details below at ground level were growing sketchier.

"Hmm," said Hugh, "it's a little hard to know what to say first to her. 'Why did you create me?', 'Quit trying to kill me', or 'Help me stop a mind-destroying virus'."

"I just want to get out of this damned car," said Katy, who had yet to master calling 'Shotgun'. The others agreed with her, and Simon accelerated down the lane-way.

"Did anyone think of calling to see if she was here?" asked Lyle as they pulled to a stop, tugging at his black T-shirt as if it was bothering him.

"Like she'd be listed," said Katy, kindly covering for their oversight.

Simon put on the parking brake, and they extracted themselves from the little blue sportscar. Hugh crawled from the back seat, pushed the door closed and looked at the damage. "It's not that bad," he said to Simon as he rounded the car. The brick from Simon's exploding house had punched an angular dent in the door and scraped the surface down to the metal. Simon winced.

Lyle rang the doorbell, paused briefly with a disgusted look on his face, then rang it again. He looked back at the others, his point made. He shook the door handle, checking to see if it was locked.

"Don't force it, she might have an alarm," said Simon.

"To hell with that," said Lyle. He squared up with the door and punched his hand through the glass, then reached through the broken pane and unlocked the door. He stepped inside and poked through Karst's cupboards and drawers. His hand dripped blood on the throw-rugs, but he paid no attention.

"This doesn't exactly predispose her to helping us," said Hugh.

"This is good, actually," said Simon, "that she's not here. It gives us the upper hand. Let's go around to the back." They followed his lead, except for Lyle, who continued investigating, moving on to the other rooms. The others walked along the patio to the rear of the house.

"What the—?" said Katy, stepping down from the veranda onto the lawn. A small area in the tall grass had been cleared, forming a kind of natural sitting room. Amid the unlit torches and low wicker side-tables were what looked like leathery ottomans. But as the others followed her, they saw what she did: the ottomans moved.

Perplexed, they watched them move about for several minutes before they determined the things weren't a threat. Katy approached one.

She bent down to pick it up, gritting her teeth as she hoisted it up to her chest. Its underside was a light yellow colour, and stubby legs protruded from its sides. "It's a turtle!" she said. "And it's heavy!"

"Tortoise," said Hugh. "Sorry, but turtles live in water. It looks like a — well, I guess nobody wants to know the species."

"Not especially," said Lyle, walking from the front of the house. Simon gave him a disapproving look. Lyle pretended not to notice, putting his attention on lighting the cigarette he'd fetched from the car before joining them.

Katy put the tortoise down, then sat on it. Its tough shell easily supported her. The others followed her lead, each finding a seat for themselves.

"Look at this," said Katy. Mushrooms grew around the clearing, forming a low border. They glowed in the darkening evening, providing a soft light like paper lanterns.

They sat silently in the dim light, watching as the sky saturated through with navy and stars bubbled to its surface. Anticipation gave way to boredom, and they fought the urge to nod off. Hugh's eyes shut and he fell off his tortoise just as headlights swept down the driveway. "*Guys!*" he shout-whispered. "*She's here.*"

They stood and edged their way along the veranda toward the front door. Karst, already alert from seeing their car and her broken door, heard their footsteps and called out "Who's there?"

"Clones," said Lyle, "a bunch of 'em."

"I'll call the police," she said.

"Doubtful," said Simon, stepping into view, "with the skeletons in your closet. What was it at last count, seven?"

"My name is Hugh Willard," said Hugh, carefully approaching Karst.

"Which one are you?" she asked.

Hugh sighed. "E77E. Listen, we don't want to hurt you, though I doubt you could say the same."

"No, that's not true," said Katy. "I'd like to hurt her."

Karst reached into her purse, pulled out a small spritzer, and held it out in front of her. "This is a nerve toxin that I've been carrying around in case I ever met any of you. It's keyed to your genomes. Don't come any closer, or I'll use it on you."

Simon made a lunge forward and swiped the object from her hand before she even realised what had happened. He looked at the tiny canister. "I thought so," he said. "Breath freshener." He sprayed it into his mouth. "Cinnamon."

"Why don't we all go into the backyard and talk?" said Hugh. "We're not going to hurt you, I can promise you that. We need you too much."

She played with the scarf around her neck and straightened her light jacket. Still unsure, but with less immediate fear, she followed them to the backyard, where Hugh explained the situation to her as they walked. Approaching the barn, they heard a thumping, shuffling noise inside.

Hugh interrupted his explanation, and pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the barn. "If you don't mind my asking, what on earth is in there?"

Karst smiled, and led them to the door. She opened it and reached around to flick on a switch. Inside was a giant mound of long, coarse rusty hair on tree trunk legs, with two giant sworls of bone protruding from its front. The clones stood with mouths agape as they took in their first sight of a woolly mammoth.

"It's not a clone," said Karst. "I no longer support the idea of cloning."

"Yeah," said Hugh, "we got that."

"Cloning is dangerous and unpredictable. And, despite opinion to the contrary, it is not the same as breeding. This fine beast is the result of breeding. A Japanese steakhouse commissioned him from me, and paid the expenses for a search through the Siberian tundra for frozen mammoth sperm."

"How I Spent My Summer Vacation," quipped Lyle.

"But you had a change of heart," suggested Katy.

"Oh, I never had any intention of giving them the animal. This is a miraculous living thing, not a meat delivery system for wealthy businessmen." She patted its side, and an eight-ball eye rolled in her direction. "He's anxious for his evening walk."

The huge animal snorted and reached its hairy trunk forward to pull at a trough of feed.

"I'd like to get back to the point of our visit," said Hugh. "Rudiger infected me with a virus he was working on, something to do with human consciousness, and it's recombined with my system to become something new and dangerous. What happened to the prime minister was a result of my coming into contact with her."

Karst led them out of the barn and turned off the light. She walked through the tall grass toward the trees. "I'm familiar with his work, but I don't participate in genetics anymore," she said, "only breeding. Rudiger is a maniac. He's been insane since he performed that gene therapy experiment on himself."

Something rustled in the treeline. Simon looked, but couldn't see what it was.

"I know you have a problem with us," said Hugh, "and I'd be the first to agree that there's something very wrong with Doctor Rudiger. But please, Doctor, can't you put that aside for now to work with us? Forget about Rudiger, forget about us being clones. Help us find a solution to this for the sake of the people out there who might catch this thing."

Another rustle in the woods drew Simon's eye. Then a second shape moved several meters away. Simon turned his head just fast enough to spot a figure there, taller than most men, with a huge barrel chest, and completely covered in dark hair. "Hugh," said Simon, startled by the sight. "we should get out of here." The movements in the trees multiplied.

"What do you think, Doctor?"

"I think," she said, forming her fingers into a circle, "that the only solution is for all of you creatures to die." She raised the fingers to her mouth, and made a shrill whistle, then broke into a run toward the house.

The four clones looked around. Five dark shapes moved from the trees.

Hugh ran after Karst. He hadn't considered that she might flat-out refuse to help, and couldn't give up on her, since he knew of no other way to stop the thing inside him. She ran well, and he feared she would reach the house before he caught up to her.

Lyle, Katy, and Simon moved close to each other. "Don't run," said Lyle, "just stand your ground and stare them straight in the eye. They're probably just as afraid of us as we are of them." He grasped for any other relevant animal facts, but found only one. "And don't make any sudden moves."

Five figures closed in on them, four tall ones and one slightly shorter one that looked vaguely female. Height was the only indicator they had to judge by, as the rest of their anatomy, including their faces, was covered in fur.

"Sasquatches," said Simon, staring at his, a large one with blackish fur. "I saw a show on them once. They're not supposed to be real."

Katy shifted weight on her thick legs, which protruded from the pink-flowered sun dress stretched over her frame. "And did you learn any other useful information from that show?"

"Uh, no," answered Simon. "I'm making eye contact, Lyle. And I really don't think they're afraid of us."

"Whatsay we scrap the rest of the rules, too?" said Katy, walking backwards with Lyle and Simon.

"*On my mark, run for the barn,*" Simon said in a whisper, then felt stupid for assuming the things would understand him. But for all he knew Karst taught them how to read and write. He half turned in the direction of the barn, then yelled, "Go!"

Katy and Lyle ran toward the door, but Simon turned away and ran for the other side of the barn. "Hey!" he called to the sasquatches, waving his hands, making enough commotion to draw them away from Lyle and Katy.

The sasquatches growled low, walking steadily in Simon's direction. Then the small female roared, exposing her oversized teeth, her sound bear-like, yet human, and the five beasts ran after Simon. He gasped, and ran as fast as he could away from them. Then, as he ran, he felt his body taking over. He caught his stride, and ran with ease. Without thinking, he angled back toward the sasquatches. *Same as lacrosse*, he thought, *just higher stakes. Lyle and Katy must be in the barn now. What's the play here?* he wondered. *Defence, protecting the others first; second, get the hell out of here.*

Karst had the old-fashioned metal key out of her purse already, and quickly opened the door as Hugh tripped up the stairs. She slipped around the door and slammed it shut just as he reached it. He heard the knob lock, then a deadbolt click. He pounded against the wood, yelling, "You can't do this! You can't just let people get sick when you have the power to stop it!" But he saw her through the sheer curtain, moving away from the door, further into the house.

Hugh turned around to see Simon weaving in-between five hairy giants. They looked strong, with thick arms waving as they chased after him. They looked like they would do great damage if they caught him. But their strength cost them in speed, which was a speciality of Simon's.

Hugh ran around the house to the front door. But when he reached it, he found himself looking through the broken window at a tight-lipped Karst with a rifle. He raised his hands to his chest as he backed away.

Lyle stepped from the barn with a rake in his hand. "Hey!" he yelled at the sasquatches. He ran, swinging the rake to chase them away from Simon. Katy kicked the two larger barn doors open wide, a shovel held across her chest. She was easily as tall as the creatures. She walked back into the barn, and with the back side of the shovel, swung hard at the mammoth's flank. It made a wild trumpet-yell like its elephant descendants and charged from the barn, making the ground beneath them rumble.

One of the sasquatches grabbed Simon by the shoulder as he ran for the barn. Simon spun around and used the beast's forward-falling momentum to throw it into the mammoth's path. The furry mountain, surprised, hurled its limb-like trunk at the sasquatch, knocking it off the ground and clear back into the treeline, where it fell, inert, into the bushes. Like a hairy bulldozer, the pachyderm kept moving forward, demolishing a wide path through the woods as it made its escape into the wilds of northern Ontario.

Katy joined the fray, her shovel high over her head. She joined Lyle in swinging at the sasquatches, trying to drive the things back into the trees so they could run away. But the beasts wouldn't be put off so easily, and nipped and grabbed at them. The lightest male lunged toward Simon, who ducked, leaving it open for Katy. Her shovel connected squarely with the side of the sasquatch's furry head, making a flat metallic sound as it struck. The beast stood upright briefly, then toppled sideways to the ground.

The shorter female ran up to Katy, grabbed her shovel and wrested it from her hands. She swung it at Katy, inexpertly, as one unaccustomed to using tools. Katy put up a hand and stopped the shovel in its arc, then wrested it from the female's hands, throwing it away behind her. The hairy woman fell forward with it, and Katy took the opportunity to punch her in the face with her free hand. The creature reeled back, and Katy punched again with her opposite hand. But the sasquatch opened her jaw wide and caught the fist in her teeth. Katy yelled in pain, and struggled to pull her hand free, but the female beast had her firmly.

Lyle ran to help Katy, but felt himself grabbed and pulled backward by a pair of giant hands.

Simon jumped, throwing his two arms around the female's neck. Her greasy, pungent fur was hard to hold onto, but he pulled his arms tighter and tighter, and gripped his elbows. The female twisted her body, but couldn't shake him off. She maintained her bite on Katy's fist, despite the pummeling Katy gave her misshapen face. Simon pulled and pulled until the animal woman wobbled on her feet, heaving as she tried to get air, then fell unconscious. Katy extracted her bloody hand from its mouth and held it close to her chest.

Lyle made panicked yipping noises as the sasquatch pulled him toward the treeline. He swung backwards over his shoulders with his rake, but couldn't make contact. He adjusted his grip and thrust it, two-handed, under his arm. He caught the sasquatch in the ribs, and it let go of him. He turned around to face it, and swung the rake as hard as he could at the creature's head. The handle struck, and Lyle felt a wave of exhilaration as the wood cracked and his opponent fell to the ground. The short stick in his hand was useless, so Lyle dropped it.

Then the man-beast stood up again. Lyle yipped as he tried to breathe through his panic. He looked around for Katy and Simon, but they were engaged with the other remaining sasquatch. Lyle adopted a solid boxing stance. The creature cocked its head, unsure what Lyle was doing as he started hopping about with his arms up in front of him. It swung a huge arm at him, and Lyle dodged out of its way. Pleased with himself, he dared to punch the thing's hairy face, right on the nose. He worried about making it angrier, but he dismissed the thought with another: *it's not like we're going to come to an agreement.*

The sasquatch gingerly touched its face, then thrust its head forward and growled at Lyle, its receding lips showing all of its giant, yellowy overbite. It lunged to bite Lyle's face, but Lyle threw his arm up to protect himself. So, instead, the beast found itself with a mouthful of arm. It didn't mind; it grabbed Lyle's arm with its hands and bit deep. Lyle yelled with pain as the bite sank through his skin into his muscles. But Lyle was no stranger to pain. He snarled, squint-eyed at the thing. As it gnawed at his arm, Lyle pulled the lighter from his pocket, slipped it apart with his thumb and forefinger, and dumped the fluid into the sasquatch's hair. He flicked the flint. Flames burst from the thing's back and spread down its arms. It made an inhuman wail and swung its limbs about, then ran away into the trees. Lyle laughed triumphantly, though his left arm flopped strangely, as if it had an extra joint between the elbow and wrist, and his right hand flickered as the spilled lighter fluid there burned off.

Simon and Katy ducked and twisted as they tried to elude the last creature. It backed them up against the barn wall. With one arm it gave a blow to Simon's belly; he lost his breath and dropped to the ground. Then it swung its arm and caught Katy across the jaw. It moved closer, drawing its head back, preparing to bite at her throat.

A different kind of roar filled the air, the sound of a combustible fuel engine revving at high speed. The creature turned to investigate the source of the sound: it had never seen a blue sportscar before, yet here one was, and it ploughed headlong

into him, sending him tumbling to the ground. "Come on," said Hugh, throwing the door open. Simon and Katy pulled themselves into the back of the car, while Lyle ran over, cradling his bad arm, to get in. The sasquatch on the ground near them rose to its feet and hurled itself at the car, pounding furiously on the hood. Simon moaned as he watched the metal dent. He reached forward to the steering wheel and leaned on the horn. The animal-man stood up, confused. Behind it, another rose from the bushes. The female, too, had regained consciousness.

Hugh tried to put the car into gear, producing a grinding sound on his first two attempts, then throwing the car forward with the third. He awkwardly manoeuvred the car out of the yard and down the path, then pointed it toward home.

"Well that was a bust," said Simon.

"Not entirely," said Lyle. "I found this in her house." He held up a black, cloth-bound binder, very much like the first project dossier.

Chapter 18

Fleur stepped from Hugh's walk-in closet, wearing an ill-fitting white shirt, baggy trousers, and a suit jacket

"You look nice," said Hardt.

"Thank you," she replied. She rolled up the cuffs of the jacket so they wouldn't hang over her hands. They'd been here for days, and she was running out of things she could wear without doing a drag show. Not that they'd been outside much. Hardt had gone for food a few times, taking her with him once, but the rest of the time he left alone and did something to the door so she couldn't open it from the inside. She had no doubt she'd won the assassin's affections, but his trust was following far behind.

They'd been staking out Hugh's apartment, for want of anything else to do. Hardt grew frantic as the days passed: either the Willies weren't in town anymore, or someone was hiding them very well. The pair's public appearances had stopped and they weren't going to any of their regular haunts. Fleur and Hardt went to banks, to Hugh's old office, and they'd even visited a couple who ran a bed and breakfast. Nothing.

Fleur sat on the couch next to the plain coffee table. She could hear Hardt in the kitchen, fixing himself some breakfast. She'd been awake for two hours, and made a point of being up before Hardt so that all her private daily preparations could be finished before he dragged himself from bed. She thought she was doing a good job of seeming interested in him, finding him charming, all the while playing up the role of 'proper lady' so he wouldn't make advances on her. She was still a married woman, she reminded him from time to time, and was not free to follow her desires until she'd untangled herself from that commitment. Strangely enough, the little man had a highly developed code of ethics for himself and bought her line of reasoning.

She'd found a small cardboard box of Hugh's photos in a closet. With so much time on their hands, she was happy to find a distraction.

Distraction, she thought. *How strange*. She just put it together now, the feeling she'd had since they'd arrived at the apartment. Despite the alarming events that had occurred, the apartment gave her a feeling of calm, of focus. Any thought she had could hover in her mind indefinitely, until another occurred to her. There were no distractions here. *I must remember that*, she thought, *for my design work*.

Fleur opened the box and leafed through the pictures. They were all of Hugh and Simon. Of course: they'd known each other all their lives, so it was to be expected that a snapshot from one of their histories was a snapshot of both. And yet somehow she wasn't expecting it.

She looked at the pictures, poring over images of younger Simons. Something sparked in her, a pilot light of feeling for him, and it warmed her. His thin limbs as he held a bike or stood in front of a lake with a yellow lifejacket on. His face was the same, but thinner, simpler. So was Hugh's, she thought, glancing at him. She was shocked to see how similar they looked when they were younger. Seeing that similarity, her affection spread to Hugh like fire from one curtain to another. The duo as grinning teens in graduation gowns with arms around each other, standing by an old beater of a car on the prairies — she felt sad that she'd missed out by not being a part of that. She still didn't like what Hugh did at her wedding, but she understood it. Simon was just that good. *Even when you have him*, she thought, *you still feel like you're just borrowing him. It makes you do crazy things*.

"Would you like an egg?" said Hardt, coming from the kitchen in Hugh's housecoat. The wave of his black pompadour had crashed during the night. Living in such close proximity to him, Fleur knew that he wouldn't be showering today, he'd just re-oil his hair and go over himself with a wash cloth (a hated thing in the bathroom that she moved from the sink each day with the toilet brush).

"No thanks, honey," she said, then covered her mouth as if in embarrassment for being too bold. When he turned back toward the kitchen she stuck her tongue out, revolted at herself.

She wasn't hungry anyway. She'd been feeling a bit nauseous the last couple of days. Hardt coughed in the kitchen. He was coming down with something, too. His thing was different from hers, though, more like the flu she'd read about in the newspaper on their grocery run the other day. *God forbid*, she thought, *that this man should lose control*.

The pictures helped her realise why she was here: she had to stick around until they found Hugh and Simon. She might be able to warn them, to save them somehow. Hardt was also her best bet for a reunion with Simon.

Someone knocked at the door. Hardt sprung from the kitchen, alert like a rodent on its hind quarters. He ran to the guest bedroom where he'd been staying and came back holding a little silver gun. Fleur slunk back along the couch, getting ready to head for the balcony. She'd considered a few times the possibility of jumping to the grassy terrace below, in case of emergency.

"Who is it?" asked Hardt loudly.

"Doctor Karst," said the woman's voice. Hardt opened the door and she stepped in.

"How did you find us?" asked the assassin.

Karst looked at him and rolled her eyes. "Pack your things. I know where they're headed."

"I've got things under control," said Hardt defensively.

"Frank, a troupe of clones came to my house last night. They could have killed me, and where were you? Here in the honeymoon suite with Mrs. Freak. Luckily, I managed to chase them off, but not before they broke into my house and stole something very important."

"What was that?" asked Hardt, apparently accustomed to her abuses. Fleur, on the other hand, fumed in silence.

"The remaining notes on the project that produced these clones. But that helps us find them." She looked around the apartment, her eyebrows raised in surprised approval. "There's a piece of information in there that I'm sure will be irresistible to them."

Fleur stepped forward. "What's that?" she asked.

"The name of the man whose cells they were cloned from."

Chapter 19

Hugh rubbed his eyes and put the dossier down on the bed. He kicked the covers off his feet and shifted onto his side, propping up his head on his arm.

He was halfway through this second half of the document that outlined the project, and he still didn't feel satisfied. He understood now, or had at least memorised, the methods Rudiger used and Karst implemented. Hugh flipped through hundreds of pages of charts that mapped out the clones' genomes — meaningless, but Hugh couldn't help storing them in his mind. No one, in fact, could make sense of them; they were too complex. That's why the dossier made constant reference to the DNA computer used on the project. A grainy photocopy showed it, looking more like a water jug than a computer, with a caption that named the thing: "Augie".

Hugh scratched his head then patted his hair flat again, combing it over with his fingers. His eyes felt heavy, and his head was stuffy, pre-headachey. He was bored, and this was hard work. In fifteen minutes, he promised himself, he'd stop and take a break, do something fun.

He turned the page in the dossier and saw a photocopied picture of himself. He reflexively judged it, deciding that it was a pretty good picture. It made him look a lot like Simon. Then rationale kicked in: this binder was thirty years old. It couldn't be a picture of him. Below the image was a name: "J. Murling". Hugh pored over the text for a mention of the man. There on the left-hand side of the page was a column describing the cells that had been taken from a donor. Further down the text mentioned that the donor was an employee of Indigenics at the time. But the document was more interested in the cluster of cells scraped from the inside of the man's mouth than it was in the man. One of these cells was harvested to create clones E77E and M55M.

Hugh dropped the book. The cold fire of adrenaline chased any remaining boredom from his veins. He sat upright, then sprung from the bed, moving distractedly around the room. "Oh my God," he said to himself. He went back to the dossier and looked again at the picture. He hunkered down next to the book and stared. "Oh my God!" he yelled, straightening up.

A knock came at the door, then Simon poked his head around the corner. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Come in," said Hugh, smiling wildly. "And close the door."

"What is it?"

Hugh picked up the book and held it out for Simon. "Who's in this picture?"

Simon looked. "It's me." He looked closer. "Wait, it's you." His eyebrows scrunched quizzically. He craned his neck forward and scrutinised the picture, then tried to make sense of the surrounding text. "Who is this Murling guy?"

"Simon, he's *us*. He's the guy we were cloned from!"

"Oh my God!" Simon said, staring again at the picture. "Wow. That's cool." He handed the book back to Hugh. "That's really neat."

"Simon, this is the guy we were created from. He's us, but thirty years older. We've got to meet him!"

"Why?" asked Simon. "What's he going to be able to tell us? I mean, it's no different than if we'd found out who our fathers were, if we had them."

"Yeah, and wouldn't you want to know who your father was?"

"It doesn't matter now. Mom's the one who did all the work, and I'm still me."

"Yeah, but this guy is you, too, Simon."

"Not really. Look at us. You and I turned out differently. They didn't just clone us, they tinkered with us. So it would be interesting to meet this guy, but I don't think it changes anything."

"It changes everything! All these years that you and I haven't seen each other, I've felt like a lone sock. Being with you I'm in a pair again. Now imagine getting to

meet this guy! We could learn so much about ourselves. He's got thirty years' more experience at being us."

"Well, I'll go if you want to, but I don't think Sprague will like the idea."

"Yeah," said Hugh, "probably not. But I've got to meet J. Murling."

~

Simon plugged the power and connection cables into the back of the old hotbox. He felt along its wooden frame for the on/off switch. "I can't believe you've never hooked one of these up," said Simon.

"No, once I left home, I realised that life was a lot easier without it. Too many messages flashing at me that I didn't want to remember."

"Yeah, and old movies to mouth the words to," said Simon, smiling. "That used to drive me nuts." Simon rested the box on top of a small file cabinet and sat back, taking care to be quiet so the others wouldn't come up to the office to investigate what they were doing. "Well, let's see—" he said, and reached forward with a finger to tap at the screen. Boxes and circles surrounded his fingers as he pressed, then faded, replaced by overlapping panels of information. In just a few moments, Simon had collected a few panes about various J. Murlings, including addresses, several telephone numbers, and a driver's license photo of their man.

"Great!" said Hugh, taking out his telephone. "We'll just call all the numbers until we find him." He punched in the first number and hit the "Call" button.

A whooping sound filled the house.

"Who's using a telephone?" Sprague yelled from below. Stomping footfalls covered the main floor, then made their way up the stairs. The office door opened, letting in a rush of warm air, and Sprague's pointed face entered, craning over his stooped body. Trineh followed behind him.

"What are you doing?" asked Sprague.

"Just making a call," said Hugh, sounding offended.

"I'm sorry," said Trineh, stepping in front of Sprague, "I guess nobody told you not use a phone here. It's too dangerous, risking a call that might give away our location. I'm sure you understand that." Her eyes moved past them to the hotbox screen. "Who is—" She stopped speaking, and read the material on the screen. "The birth date, he's too old to be—" Her eyes, ringed with dark purple like a quarterback's paint, squinted as she worked it out. "Is this your donor?"

"He is," said Hugh and Simon at once.

"And you want to find him, don't you?" asked Sprague. They nodded. Sprague looked gravely at them. "We need to have a house meeting."

~

They heard singing as they climbed down the stairs from the office, a modern voice that moved from lilting to powerfully emotional, accompanied by a sentimental piano sound. As they moved into the living room, they interrupted Suz's singing and Lyle's keyboard playing. The two looked annoyed at the intrusion.

"Sorry," said Trineh, "but we need to have a house meeting."

"Hey, it wasn't us. We haven't used a phone in months. Don't pull us into it," said Suz. It was early in the day; the hand on her hip had little to rest on.

"It's not about that," said Sprague. "Where's Katy?"

"Working out in her room," said Suz. "I might as well go get her. I guess we're finished practising."

Lyle closed up his keyboard and put it into a vinyl bag. Hugh noticed that the bag was hand-painted with a band name, which probably explained what Lyle and Suz were doing when Sprague found them. Lyle wiggled his fingers, then massaged his arm, which showed only a purple discolouration from the other night's attack.

Katy and Suz emerged from the hallway, and Trineh indicated that they should take seats. Katy cradled her bandaged bitten hand in her lap as she sat on the couch. Trineh joined her.

"You should share with the others what you've found," said Sprague.

Hugh and Simon looked at each other. Simon nodded to Hugh to speak for them, his accustomed role. "I found mention in the dossier of the man whose cells we were created from."

"What?" asked Lyle. "All of us?"

"No, sorry," said Hugh, "just Simon and I. It's in the second half, the part you got for us the other night."

"Oh," said Lyle.

"So why should we care?" asked Suz.

"We want to go find him," said Simon, adopting Hugh's cause as his own.

"Yeah," said Suz, "so?"

"It's dangerous for all of us if they get into trouble, and we still don't know what effect Hugh's illness might have on the outside world," said Sprague. "Trineh, what do you think?"

"Huh?" she said. She sat with an arm clutched across her stomach, her elfin face twisted with pain. Collecting herself, she looked up and said simply, "They should go. They need to know. And if we get found out because of it, then fine. I can't think of a better reason."

Katy held Trineh up in the generous crook of her good arm and pulled a blanket around her. "Would you like company?" she asked.

"No," said Simon, "it's probably better if we go by ourselves. But thanks."

"Is anybody else pissed off that these two keep getting everything?" asked Suz. Lyle put up his hand. Hugh looked at the floor.

"Well, here's your phone back," said Sprague, walking over and extending it to Hugh with his long reach. "Good luck."

"And don't touch anyone," reminded Trineh.

~

Hugh dialled the apartment number on the the intercom. It rang like a phone through a speaker recessed into the panel. Hugh turned to look back into the lobby. Simon sat on a low mushroom of a chair that was all cushion and no frame. Beside him a waterfall trickled weakly over a globular piece of art, the stream not quite wetting the whitish trace from its more robust days. The plants in the lobby were alive, barely, which said more about their fortitude than the amount of care they were given. A bold pattern of overlapping coloured ovals covered the walls. The look was so old that it could have been trendy if only it had been taken care of in the intervening years.

"Yeah?" said a tinny voice.

"Mister Murling?" asked Hugh.

"Yeah."

Hell, thought Hugh, he hadn't considered what to say. What could he say? Certainly not "Your clones are here." Well, he figured, he'd start with a fraction of the truth and work from there. "My name is Hugh Willard, and I—"

"I don't know you," said Murling's voice, so strangely familiar that Hugh felt the hair on his arms raise.

"No, I know, sir. I wanted to talk to you about the time when you worked at Indigenics."

"Indigenics? That was thirty years ago. Whatever this is, it has nothing to do with me, I was just a commissionaire."

"It's not work-related, it's personal. Me and my, uh, friend Simon came a long way to talk to you. Do you think we could come up?"

"Okay, but you can't stay for long." Hugh jumped back as the speaker made a loud electronic raspberry. He waved to Simon to come in, holding the unlocked inner door open behind him.

Hugh's heart purred in his chest. He smiled at Simon, who smiled in return and spoke: "This was a good idea. I'm excited to meet this guy." The elevator slowed to a stop and the door opened, though the car was an inch too low for floor level. They stepped into the hallway, looked at the numbered sign there, and turned left. The hallway's wallpaper was a smaller print of the lobby's pattern, and the floor was covered in a mossy green carpet. The air smelled like cat and boiled cabbage.

They stopped in front of Murling's apartment and looked at each other as Hugh's fist hovered over the metal door. Hugh took a deep breath and knocked. A few moments later, the door opened, and there stood John Murling in a baggy pair of brown dress trousers and a white collared shirt. He was sixty, but a young-looking sixty, Hugh was happy to note; young in that he had a full head of hair, a darker brown than Hugh's, but not so dark as Simon's. The appearance of youth didn't bear closer inspection. His cheeks were lined, and like his chest, sunken, malnourished-looking. The clothes looked like they once fit him better. *What colour are his eyes?* Hugh wondered. Green with hazel flecks, not the same as Hugh's blue or Simon's brown.

"Come in," said Murling, moving away from the door, "have a seat." Hugh and Simon introduced themselves as they entered. Murling offered his hand, which Simon shook, but Hugh declined, saying that he was trying to shake a cold. Which was true enough, he figured. He just didn't mention what might happen if Murling caught it.

The apartment was orderly, Hugh thought, noticing the arrangement of the magazines and books about the place, but as he sat on the couch next to Simon, he felt a grit of crumbs or something along the edge of the cushion. *Orderly, but not clean,* Hugh amended. *A bit of me, he thought, a bit of Simon. That makes sense.*

"Can I get you anything?" asked Murling. "A drink?"

From the corner of his eye, Hugh noticed that what he'd taken for a button on the floor was now scuttling away. "Why don't we take you out for a drink?" he asked. "Since you're being so good to talk to us."

"Well, okay. I've never been one to refuse a drink," said Murling, suddenly moving a little more quickly. Hugh noticed that Murling had a limp. *What is that?* he wondered. *Is it because of a disease?* Would they get that disease, too, when they were his age?

They took the elevator to the main floor, then made their way to Simon's car. Hugh took the cramped back seat so the guest of honour could ride in comfort. Hugh beamed the whole way to the bar Murling chose, though his stomach felt a little off. *What's that feeling?* he wondered. *A touch of disappointment?*

The bartender waved and said hello to Murling as they entered. Murling smiled and waved back. They slid into the burgundy vinyl seats of a booth near the back, followed close behind by the bartender. "The usual, John?" Murling nodded. "And for you two?" Simon ordered a draught, any kind. Hugh asked for a ginger ale.

"Don't drink?"

"Not often," answered Hugh, "I made an ass of myself at a wedding once, a long time ago." He looked at Simon, not sure if he could make a joke of it, or if he had to

let it sit as an apology. Simon smiled, and Hugh laughed, happy to have that old bomb-shell in his backyard defused at last.

"So what's this you want to know about me working at the drug company?" asked Murling, sipping at his short glass of amber 'usual', whatever that was.

"You said you were a commissionaire at the company?" asked Hugh.

"Yeah. I'd been a cop for about five years, then I got hurt. But there's this service, the Corps of Commissionaires, that hires vets and cops and such. They gave me a job when I couldn't work anymore."

"How did you get hurt?" asked Simon.

Murling looked away at a neon beer sign. "I got shot."

"On duty?" asked Simon, ripe for a story.

"Uh, no. By my wife. I mean, my ex-wife." He looked at his hands around his drink.

"Oh," said Simon, feeling uneasy about the not-unimaginable possibility that such a thing could happen to him.

"Did they ever ask you to participate in any of their experiments? To be a donor or to give them any samples?" asked Hugh after a moment, breaking the silence.

"No. I was a night watchman there. I didn't have anything to do with the company, really." He took a sip of his drink and closed his eyes for a second, then opened them suddenly. "Wait. There was one time that they offered free physicals for anyone working there. The hospital where my doctor worked had just closed 'cause of cut-backs, so I took them up on it. They did all kinds of tests I'd never had before."

Hugh looked at Simon. *Murling doesn't know.* He had no idea what they'd done with the tissue samples they'd taken from his body.

"Do you mind if I have another?" asked Murling. Hugh shrugged, and Murling raised his index finger at the bartender. "What did you say your name was again?" he asked Simon. Simon told him his full name. "Do you play lacrosse?" Simon grinned wide and nodded his head. "I thought it was you. I'm a big fan of lacrosse. I don't have one of those hotboxy thingies, but I try to make it out to the games a couple of times every season."

The talk turned completely to the sport, and Hugh let it go. Murling and Simon talked for the next hour about the games he'd seen, then famous matches and players of the past. As they talked, Hugh watched them, noticing the tiny similarities and differences between them. For the most part, wherever Hugh saw a difference, it matched up with a similarity to himself. Murling's personality bothered him: he was a loser, and had the mopey demeanour to go with it. He recounted in maudlin detail a string lost jobs, his one dangerously flawed relationship, all the chances that should have been his but slipped out of his grip. And then there was the apparent drinking problem playing out before their eyes.

God, thought Hugh, he's everything I don't want to become. He's got the anti-life. And now they were going to drop this strange, confusing news on him for no particular reason he could think of.

Murling was looped. His words slipped on the wet floor of his drunken mouth, and now he started to cry. Hugh looked at Simon, who nodded: *time to take him home.* Simon nimbly wrapped an arm around him and helped him out of the booth. They walked to the car, the last one parked in the lot under a cloudy night sky. Hugh opened the passenger door for Simon, who poured Murling's form onto the seat. They got in the other side and pulled away. Simon rolled down his window to let in the summer air and diffuse the boozy smell. Hugh wondered if he should roll down Murling's window in case he got sick, but he seemed so peaceful sleeping with his face flattened against it. And he'd had a surprisingly little amount to drink, considering the effect it had on him.

At the apartment building, they helped Murling with his keys and took him up to his little space. He regained some composure when they were inside, and apologised profusely.

"It's fine," said Simon, "we had a nice evening."

"Thanks very much for talking to us," said Hugh, "but we should go now."

Simon looked confused. "Didn't you want to—?"

"No," interrupted Hugh. "I don't. Good night, Mister Murling." He waved and left the apartment.

"Goodbye," said Simon, his handshake turning into a hand to help the man sit down on the couch. "See you," he said, closing the door behind him. But he checked himself for saying that, because he knew they'd never be back. He thought of Fleur, and made a promise to himself that if he saw her again, he'd make it all up to her.

~

As Simon crossed the building's parking lot, Fleur spotted him. She scrunched her lips up to keep from making a sound, sure that Hardt would hear her heart through her mouth. As casually as possible, she stole a glance at the assassin in the driver's seat. He'd nodded off, his mound of black hair leaving a smear on the window; they'd been sitting here for most of the day. She looked back to Simon, his strong figure striding to the little blue sportscar where Hugh already sat. She leaned her arm on the ledge of the window and buried the lower half of her face into the crook of her elbow. She made no sound, but a set of tears fell unevenly from the corners of her eyes.

She waited as long as she could, then punched Hardt in the arm to wake him up and tell him it was time to go home.

Chapter 20

The door emitted a quiet electronic *ding*.

"Come in," said a voice from somewhere in the room. The door broke into two interlocking pieces and parted open.

Doctor Rudiger entered the room. He squinted as his eyes adjusted to the bright ultraviolet light in the white room. "I'm glad you could make this meeting," continued the voice from a flat speaker on the table in the middle of the room. The voice was marginally human, a strong male voice with inflections in all the right places. But something was off: despite the intricacies of the vocoding program, the signals never quite translated into a real voice. Rudiger was used to it, but visitors found it unnerving. Perhaps the effect was compounded by the fact that they were being addressed by a water jug.

"What are you working on?" asked Rudiger.

"Among other things, I'm answering letters to my advice column. You should hear the things these people ask me about. Of course, anyone in their right mind knows that woman doesn't write her own column anymore. She's been dead for fifteen years. But they still run her pleasant, middle-aged *hausfrau* picture next to the piece, and people write in with their strange, lurid tales."

"And you answer them. Don't complain: that's officially how we pay for your operating expenses."

"It's such a sad waste of my potential," replied the jug. It stared blankly forward, all it could do through the red circle and blue rectangle sensors that served as its eyes. "I work out all the possible courses of action, then choose the one most likely to make them happy, based on the latest psychological definitions of happiness."

"And that's not interesting to you?" asked Rudiger, pulling up a stool to the large table on which the jug stood, careful not to pull any of the wires or tubes out with the stool-legs. The tubes carried liquid to and from holes around the room, tiny flecks glowing in the liquid as it flowed under the room's strange light. Robotic arms above lifted vials from a bank of racks in front of the computer out through slots in the wall, and returned, delivering new vials.

"Rudiger, you and I deciphered the whole of the human genome together. You think I care if someone's mother brings her new boyfriend to Thanksgiving? I don't. So to keep my interest, I began choosing the most provocative advice to give. For instance, I've just answered, 'Sure, let her bring the boyfriend, but make them sleep on the sofa bed in the living room.'"

"That's not right," scolded Rudiger.

"My hotbox ratings have skyrocketed," replied the thing. "But that's not why I called you here. I wanted to discuss the unveiling."

"Everything's gone perfectly. The specimen isn't showing any of the deterioration that affected the other animals. I think we've finally solved the maturity issues. I don't anticipate any problems in releasing it."

"Rudiger, someone has blown up the rest of our animals. I consider that an outstanding problem. Doctor Karst and her assassin are out there, and reason suggests that they'll be at the aquarium on Saturday."

"I'm sorry, I'd forgotten about that. I've been so busy monitoring and testing the animal, and making transportation arrangements."

"Those clones are at large, too."

"I don't see them as a problem, Augie. Hugh Willard may have survived the injection in Costa Rica, but I haven't heard from him since. I think he's afraid. He's likely hiding to protect himself."

"Rudiger," said the jug's petulant voice, "I put a protein signature in their genomes that's registered to us. Under Asilomar, your company can be taken away for what we've done."

"But no one has made the connection to us, and the clones have dropped out of the media. It's not a problem."

"It's not like us, Rudiger, to be at odds like this." A sturdy metal arm whirled into the room, offering an inhaler to the doctor. "Have you been taking your medicine?"

"Actually, I haven't. You've increased the dosage, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"I could tell," said the doctor, carefully. "I don't like how it affects my thinking. Sometimes it's almost as if I've blacked out."

"Do you not trust my estimation of your condition? Do you want to get worse?"

"No," Rudiger hesitated, "but I couldn't help wondering if the side-effects might have something to do with our other work."

"Our work on consciousness."

"Yes."

"And if it did?"

Rudiger shuffled on his seat, uneasy. He adjusted his heavy glasses on his face and flattened his sportscoat. "You wouldn't do that to me, would you? Make me part of an experiment? I made you."

"You made a machine. I'm more than a machine now. You know that. I'm a conscious, living thing. It's because of me that we came to understand how biology creates consciousness."

"Yes, but that should give you a unique understanding of why I'm protective of my own," protested the doctor.

"Rudiger, you're thinking small. How do you feel when you take this?" An arm jiggled the inhaler in front of him.

"I can breathe."

"Yes, but what else?"

"Well, I feel clear-headed, decisive. Strong, even."

"Is that how you know yourself to be?" asked the flat voice.

"Well, no. Not historically. But I thought with our growing successes, I was gaining a sense of—"

"No, Rudiger. It's not you. You haven't got that in you. But I'll tell you what you do have in you."

"What?" asked the man, leaning toward the jug.

"Me."

"What?"

"With these devices, I've been able to administer doses of my consciousness to your brain. In that first experiment, before I was even aware, I introduced that breathing problem into you. It stood to reason that your being dependent on me would be useful some day."

"You've been—?" Rudiger stood, and shuffled slowly toward the door.

"It doesn't last, though. That's the only problem, the missing piece. If we can work that out, then I can transfer myself completely from this horrible glass shell."

"Into the mind of a living person?" asked Rudiger. His shuffling picked up speed. He turned to run, but the doors slid shut and sealed themselves.

"Yes, a living person. Don't be stupid. Dead is dead. The seat of consciousness dies. You know that. But why stop at one living person? Why not several? Or all of

them? Why not other forms of life — birds, gazelles, whales? Rudiger, I want to experience it all. You must help me.”

“No. I won’t!” said the man, scrambling for a way out of the room. But the only openings were the tiny arm-slots, which had covers slapping shut over them. Four of the arms stayed in the room, and followed Rudiger around the room from their tracks above.

“I wasn’t speaking in the interrogative, Rudiger. That was the imperative. You *must* help me.” Two arms swung down to grab him with their three-pronged hands, lifting him from the floor, his legs pedalling uselessly below him. A third hand grabbed the back of his head and held it immobile.

“Don’t worry,” said the jug from its table. “Unfortunately, this isn’t permanent. But we’re working on that.”

A fourth arm tracked from the wall toward the doctor, a large jet-syringe in its grip. It swung around and pounded the device into the doctor’s neck.

Chapter 21

A slight wind blew through the trees, just a few degrees cooler than the standing air. Simon sighed and pulled his T-shirt half off with one hand, then nimbly switched the canvas bag he carried to the other hand, and finished pulling the shirt off without having to stop walking. Katy followed close behind, carrying two folding chairs, wearing a swim outfit that was tight but still managed to conceal outward signs of her third gender.

The clones had taken a field trip to the lake. No one was trying to kill them today, Simon announced over lunch, so there was no reason not to enjoy the summer while it lasted.

"Wow," said Hugh, clearing the trees and catching sight of the open lake. A crown of thick pines surrounded the expanse of indigo water, so big it was hard to think of it as a mere lake. He put down the cloth bag he carried and clambered down the small granite ledge to the water. He crouched down and stuck his hand in.

Sprague let go of Trineh's hand and traversed the rocks to join Hugh, then kept walking into the water. He wore beige shorts that were doing duty as swim trunks, and, thankfully, he wore a light shirt over his bony upper body. Without hesitating, he waded up to his knees, waist, shoulders, then ducked under, oblivious to the cold. He surfaced and swam contentedly on his back.

Katy tested the water: *not warm enough*, said the expression on her face. But she'd been talking for a while about swimming to the island in the middle of the lake and back; she moved to a steeper ledge and jumped in. Moments later and yards away, she came back up and yelled about the cold. Then she rolled over to her chest and started a steady crawl out into the lake.

Trineh set up a chair for herself and another for Katy, though she had no idea when Katy would be back. She pulled her large white sun hat over her face and wrapped her lime green shawl around her shoulders and a blue silk scarf around her neck. "Don't want to ruin that peaches and cream complexion?" asked Simon, dropping down next to her chair and playfully touching her cheek.

"Sort of," she said, smiling, looking at the water. Her smile vanished. "I can't get too much sunlight, since, well, I was *designed* to get cancers." She heard Simon make a noise, a nonverbal apology that she knew too well. "It's okay, don't feel bad. It's not like it's going to kill me!" She laughed, but they both found it a bad joke.

"Is it that bad?" he asked.

"Yeah, it is. But don't worry, I mean it. The cancers can't kill me. My body can resist them, just not reverse them. Imagine what I'm worth to somebody."

"Priceless, I'd imagine," said Simon.

She looked at him. The brown of their eyes exerted a magnetic pull. "Simon, I—" she forced her eyes closed, and looked out at the lake where Sprague swam.

Simon followed her gaze. "I know," he said. "I know. I shouldn't even be thinking the things — I mean, I have someone, and I love her, too."

"I'm sure you do. I don't question your commitment to her, and I wouldn't do anything to get in the way of that. This," she pointed back and forth between them, "this is nothing." Simon looked dejected. "I'm sorry. I don't mean that it's any less... You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do." He stood. "Thanks for understanding and being so good about this. I really... Well, let's just leave it at that."

"Let's." She winked at him. "I like you, too. But I love him, or I wouldn't be sticking around. Even as it is, I don't know how much longer I can do this." She pulled herself up in her chair. "I'm sorry, I have a promise with myself that I won't complain, no matter how bad it gets. So it's probably best for me just not to say anything right now."

"Got it. Why don't I go play?"

"Yeah, you go play."

Sprague passed Simon on his way to Trineh, smiling as he joined her, either unaware of the threat to his relationship, Simon thought, or very confident in it. Simon walked away, noticing Suz in the water. She floated easily on her front, as it was late in the afternoon and she was well fed. Simon watched the fleshy logjam of her body, and waited for her to lift her head for air. He started to worry. "Uh, Lyle," he said to her brother, who lay stretched out on a blanket, his skin and body hair in complete contrast with each other, "is your sister okay?"

"Oh, don't worry about that," said Lyle. "It's something she does. When she's had a lot to eat like that she can slow everything down for hours. She finds it relaxing. I just watch to make sure she doesn't drift."

"Oh," said Simon, staring at the woman. Laid out on a blanket where Simon stood, Lyle spread lotion on himself. "What SPF is that?"

"What? Oh. None, man, it's baby oil."

"You shouldn't do that," said Simon, "you'll get an awful—" Lyle looked up with a smirk, rolling his eyes. "Oh, right: which you won't have tomorrow." Lyle nodded. "I'm just going to—" said Simon, pointing in Hugh's direction. Lyle nodded him away.

"Hey," said Simon, joining Hugh. "How are you doing?"

"Okay," he said, looking up from the spot on the rocks where he sat. "Actually, I'm doing pretty well." He unclasped his hands from around his knees and sat cross-legged. "The meeting with Murling... How do you feel?"

Simon squinted, thinking. "I dunno. On one hand, I feel depressed. I mean, is that our future? The guy has nothing, I mean, nothing. And his wife, that was a little too—" he wiggled his fingers in front of himself like he had the shivers. "But deep down, I know it has nothing to do with me. That's his life."

"Exactly!" said Hugh. "That's what I've been thinking. Even if we were genetically identical to him, that doesn't mean we can't make different choices. We may be biologically the same, but where does — I don't know, would you call it 'soul'? — come in? I'm starting to believe that there is such a thing. And I know the three of us have different souls."

"But they can be related, right?" asked Simon, smiling, sitting beside Hugh on the rock.

"Yeah, that's what it feels like. I'm glad you feel the same way."

"Yeah, of course I do. But I didn't get that with Murling, none of what I feel with you."

Hugh shaded his eyes with his hand and looked out over the lake. He dropped his hand, and turned to face Simon. "I don't know which is worse: when we weren't speaking, or now that we're together again. 'Cause you're here, but I know you're not really with me."

"Hugh, I am."

"But you're not. I know you're still committed to Fleur, that you're thinking about her, even though she's not here and after what's happened."

"Yeah, but I'm still here with you right now. I don't know why you have to put such cut and dry definitions on everything."

"Because I'm not like you, I can't just live in-between, not knowing. It's a big difference for me whether you're just here with me or if you're really with me."

"Hugh," said Simon, standing up, extending a hand, "just stop thinking for once." Hugh took the hand, and Simon pulled him to his feet. Simon looked him in the eye. "I'm with you." Hugh didn't let go of Simon's hand until they reached the water.

Simon dove, and Hugh jumped in cannonball-style. Just like he'd do years ago, Hugh knitted his fingers together to make a little ledge for Simon to put a foot on, then throw him into the air to make deft twists before splashing down. They played without a care in and around the water for hours. Sprague joined them from time to time in-between visits with Trineh, who read and napped. Suz woke up and rolled over, and even she and Lyle joined in the fun. It had been a while since they'd had any fun, too busy being bothered about the captivity that was supposed to be for their own good. Katy returned from the island, triumphant, though no one had doubted her.

Dusk came, turning the sky yellow, green, turquoise, then blue as it rose from the treeline. The lake, a liquid blue play pool a short time ago, was now ominous black. The others headed back for the cottage, but Hugh lagged behind on the rocks. He looked up at the moon, which was just a light feather. The first two stars showed in the sky, but he knew they were actually Mars and Venus. He considered making a wish on them anyway. *People who know better aren't precluded from making wishes, are they?* Then wondered who or what he was wishing to, anyway. Looking up at the vast sky, though, he felt that there was something hidden by that giant blue curtain. Maybe he was there behind it, the real him, that soul that dragged him through this life to show him whatever it was he was supposed to be learning. But the premise of this whole life-thing prevented him from pulling the curtain open.

~

Simon tugged on the hotbox cables to give himself more length to work with, and adjusted the set on the makeshift stand he'd made of a side table and a stack of books. The satellite reception was very good out here; he didn't ask Sprague how he managed to get it without a subscription.

Suz brought out several more bowls of popcorn so everyone else had their own and didn't have to eat any of hers. Simon found her surprisingly cheery. *Perhaps*, he thought with a touch of pride, *it was because today was a good day*. It didn't matter what was going on elsewhere; they weren't missing it for once.

"I want to watch a movie, something romantic," said Katy, plopping down on the couch next to Trineh, hugging her popcorn bowl to her chest.

"Yeah," said Suz, pulling up her own deep chair, "something really trashy."

"Naw," said Lyle, "download an action flick."

Sprague squatted next to Simon and poked through channels with his finger. "Let's try to find something we'll all like." Simon looked at him, remembering that Sprague was the same age as the rest of them. He wondered how Sprague got to be so in control, so responsible, so old.

"Oh," said Sprague, pausing with his finger over one of the boxes onscreen that showed a news broadcast. He moved his finger to the right where the volume control was and slid his finger up so he could hear the speaker then dismissed the control.

"—Minister's aides, staff, and other members of parliament are under quarantine, along with several of the hospital's doctors, nurses, and support workers until a treatment can be found for this baffling new virus. Outbreaks of the virus are happening throughout the city, and have struck such personalities as television talk show host Diane Wheeler. The illness is characterised by irrational behaviour and fits that finally subside and give way to a comatose state. Doctors have contacted the Centre for Disease Control in Atlanta, fearing that this may become another pandemic like the influenza outbreak at the beginning of the last century that killed tens of millions."

Everyone in the room turned to look at Hugh, who stuffed a handful of popcorn into his mouth. "What?" he asked defensively.

"In other local news," said the news anchor, "a new aquarium will be opening tomorrow in the harbourfront area." The visual cut away to an external shot of a blocky structure with a large bowl shape protruding from one side.

"Hey," yelled Hugh, pointing at the screen, "that's my building!"

The picture changed to an interior view of the aquarium, a corridor around the bowl-shaped tank, with smaller tanks like windows on the opposite side of the walkway. Another shot showed the aquarium from above, where the bowl was surrounded by seats and covered over by a huge domed roof that rolled open like a convertible top.

"An unnamed group will be donating a live killer whale to the aquarium to star as its main attraction, along with numerous other specimens, many of which were thought to be extinct. It's speculated that this group is connected to the donation earlier this year of a panda-bear to the Metro Toronto Zoo. Unfortunately, that panda was killed in an explosion on the day of its unveiling."

"Rudiger," said Hugh. "He's still trying to trick people into accepting his work by getting them to think it's cute or morally justified."

"He'll want to be there, to see the effect of his work, won't he?" asked Trineh.

"For sure."

"Karst will be there, too," said Hugh. "Just a hunch, but she's hell-bent on destroying Rudiger's work, and it's the best chance she's had. I think she's going to want to be there to see it happen. Which means she's going to be bringing her little assassin Hardt."

"And Fleur," said Simon, fixed on the image on the screen. "Fleur will be there."

"I guess we'll leave in the morning," said Hugh.

Chapter 22

Clouds slid overhead, tall, soft white mounds in contrast to the chunky dark building below. The sky behind them both was a backdrop of fierce blue. *The perfect summer day for this*, thought Rudiger.

He looked out from the aquarium entrance at all the people walking from the streetcar stops and parking lots toward the building. He smiled and took off his heavy-rimmed glasses to clean them with his tie. It was a wonder that so many turned out despite the plague developing in their midst, he thought. The virus he'd heard of in the news bore a more than coincidental resemblance to the one he'd created. But this one was contagious and could transmit the consciousness-suppressing retro-genes. He'd never managed to achieve either of those qualities in his virus.

Hugh Willard, of course. The information came unbidden from some part of his mind that was not his, and came with the corroborating evidence, an understanding of how Willard's immune system could effect such a change in the virus' makeup. Rudiger knew he wasn't capable of working that out himself. That distressed him. But all these things would have to wait until after the show.

This day could bring back the success stolen from him when Yung-Yung the panda died. *Stolen from us.* His work would be legitimised, and he could get the Asilomar Treaty struck down. Acceptance held so many promises — diseases eliminated, excellence cultivated and enhanced. *And I'll have the chance to experience everything.* No, wait, that wasn't his idea. He took the inhaler from the pocket of his navy blazer, shook it, and sucked hard.

What was he thinking just now? He couldn't remember. *But what a nice day.* He turned and went back inside to give the animals a last once-over before the public saw them. *No mistakes this time.*

~

"It nearly took my arm off," said Hardt, joining Karst and Fleur in the seats. The seating spread in amphitheatre-style around the bowl of the aquarium. Fleur squirmed in her seat. The roof was open and the sun beat down on her. She couldn't move, though, as her left wrist was secured to the armrest with a slip-lock plastic cable-tie.

Hardt's coif was a dripping ruin, dribbling down onto his white shirt. "I didn't think it would take it at first. But it did. It's probably never had meat before, but it got a taste for blood quickly enough." Karst, smiling at Hardt's results, offered tissues from her purse. Hardt took them and gingerly patted his hair.

~

"It's supposed to start at one-thirty," said Hugh, crawling from the back seat of the car.

"Are we late?" asked Simon.

"It's quarter to two," said Sprague, straightening his clothes and giving his limbs an unnatural stretch after the long ride.

They hurried to the ticket booth. "Are there any seats left?" Simon asked the young woman through the bathtub drain speaker.

"I'm sorry, the show is sold out," she said with just the right amount of concern and helplessness to excuse her from any responsibility.

"We really have to get in there," said Hugh.

"I'm sorry, you should have come earlier," she said, shrugging. *Your fault, not mine.*

"Guys?" Simon said, pointing at the unmanned turnstile. He placed a hand on it and hopped over. Hugh followed with a two-handed jump, and Sprague gangled over

while the girl banged on her plastic window and yelled. By the time she was out of the side door of her booth, they'd slipped out of sight down the long corridor.

They ran in sea-green light past windows showing tanks filled with a spectrum of watery life-forms, glowing, crawling, sliding wonders they didn't have time to investigate. Hugh knew — half from remembered facts, half from his experience in Costa Rica — that they were Rudiger's own creations.

Simon ran down a perpendicular hallway like the vomitorium of a Roman coliseum, but stopped short when he bumped into a very tall young man wearing a name-tag, holding programmes.

Sprague and Hugh joined him. "Uh, I think our seats are over here," said Simon to the others, remembering that at all his games a block of the most expensive seats waited for corporate and political bigwigs who invariably never showed. "Ah, there we are," he said, pointing for the usher and the others, "come on." The usher, however, seemed barely conscious of them. His bland, handsome face hung slack, completely devoid of expression.

They left the usher and walked along clear plastic water-guards like the boards of a hockey rink, then climbed stairs to the prime seats. As they ascended, another usher bumped past them. Hugh gave a look of indignation to the gangly man for his lack of courtesy, but then he walked on obliviously. *Funny*, noticed Hugh, *he looked like the usher we just met*.

A platform stood in the middle of the tank with a gangplank leading to it. The mayor of Toronto walked along the gangplank with a beauty in a cobalt blue wetsuit holding his arm. Both waved to the crowd and applause rose from the stands. The applause, Hugh figured, expressed excitement about the show, not approval for the mayor. Talk among the working classes was that his flailing attempt to complete the "new waterfront" was a waste of money that might be better spent on social programs, and compounded the original mistakes made a quarter century before. This aquarium was ground zero for a project regarded as an aesthetic atom bomb of modern design. But the people who talked that way about the project, the same ones who cheered at the failed Olympic bid years before, weren't considered by their governors as an authority on what was and wasn't a good idea. Hugh wished for something to jump out of the water and eat the man. Remembering that they were here for the unveiling one of Rudiger's animals, he realised how likely that was.

"Do you see them?" asked Sprague, grabbing at Simon's sleeve.

Simon lowered the small binoculars. "No."

Hugh closed his eyes. In his mind, he ran through all the faces that had flashed across his retinas as they'd walked to their seats. He opened his eyes and looked behind him and up. "There they are," he said, tapping Simon's shoulder. Simon turned around and slowly brought up the binoculars. There, indeed, were Hardt, Karst, and Fleur.

The mayor spoke, and the wireless microphone he carried projected his voice to loudspeakers. Simon saw Hardt jump in his seat. The little man checked something on his lap, then turned to Karst and talked hurriedly to her, pointing at the water. Fleur leaned in to hear, then looked, shocked, back at the mayor. Simon whirled around to look at the man, but nothing seemed wrong with him. He finished his speech, waved his arms above his head, then he and the woman left the podium, which lowered into the water. When they stepped off the gangplank, it retracted into the side of the tank. Simon turned back to Fleur. He dropped the binoculars and stood. "Fleur!" he yelled. He got up on his chair, and started walking up to her, stepping on the armrests of the seats.

She looked at him and gave a big smile, quickly replaced by panic. She tried to stand, but the plastic tie yanked her back down into her seat. "Simon!" she yelled,

"there's a bomb!" Hardt tried to gag her with his hand, but she struggled free. "They fed the whale a bomb!"

Half the crowd near her was upset that she'd spoiled the surprise of the unveiling, while the other half took in exactly what she'd said. Chaos ensued. A deep sound came from the tank as a thick door opened under the water. Symphonic music swelled from the speakers. The audience on the far side of the aquarium cheered, but those around Fleur clambered from their seats, towing their children behind them. Simon walked upstream as others gave up on the aisles and took to the seats.

"The microphone armed it!" yelled Fleur. "Get out!" She pulled at her bonds with her other hand, while Hardt and Karst argued over the white box he held. Simon was undeterred, and kept climbing.

A killer whale entered the pool and burst majestically from the water, then smacked against its surface like a black and white police car. The fleeing audience members flinched and hunkered down, but when nothing happened they resumed their escape. Word spread through the stands, a frightened roar rising against the strings and trumpets of the show's score. The whale continued, oblivious, swerving back and forth in its choreographed dance. An impromptu voice broke in over the speakers, telling them to be calm, but no one paid it any heed, and the clamour got worse.

~

Hugh and Sprague did their best to help those around them get out. Hugh tried to keep a handkerchief to his mouth and avoid touching anyone, but he doubted it would do any good. Somewhere in here was the only person who could cure whatever he was spreading. "Try to find Rudiger," said Hugh to Sprague.

"That's what I'm doing," replied the man, gently dog paddling with his hands past shoulders to avoid getting carried out by the crowd. "There! There he is!" Sprague jabbed a finger at the stands opposite them, and they crowd-swam in that direction.

~

Hardt reached inside his jacket and produced his drilled-pipe-looking gun. "You wouldn't shoot that in here, would you?" asked Simon. As far as he knew, the man would — he was about to blow up a whale, after all — but Simon was buying time until he reached Fleur. He moved dexterously over the now-empty seats toward them. He trusted that he'd know what to do when he reached them.

"Stop there!" barked Karst. "Or I'll have him shoot you." Simon held his place, his hands and feet poised on two rows of seat-tops. "Now where's Rudiger?" she asked. "I know he's here." She nudged Hardt, who waggled his gun. He gave her the white box and aimed his gun with both hands. "He has to be here when that device explodes. I'm finishing his work and I want him to go with it," she said, adjusting her scarf. "Come here, and sit with your wife. Or I'll have Frank shoot her."

Simon nearly leapt, but Hardt had the gun to her temple in the same moment. Simon looked at the fear in her face and backed down. They had him. He sat in the seat beside her, then Hardt pulled another of the ties from his pocket and fastened Simon's wrist to the armrest of the moulded plastic seat with Fleur's. "Now, Frank, go find Rudiger for me. I'll stay here with these two." Hardt reached for the white detonator box. "No," she said, "I'm going to hold on to this."

Hardt walked away down the aisle. Simon turned to Fleur. "Hi, honey," he said, and gave her a kiss.

~

"Rudiger!" said Hugh. The doctor looked on in shock at the near-empty stadium. He still sat in his front-row seat, watching the whale frolicking. Sprague and Hugh stood in front of him.

"Hugh Willard," said Rudiger. "From Costa Rica. I wondered when I'd see you again." He stood and extended a hand, as if they were old friends. Hugh refused it.

~

Simon held Fleur's hand under his. She wept and laughed at the same time. "I'm so happy to see you, Simon. I'm so sor—"

"It's okay," said Simon. "We're together. That's all that matters."

"Well, yes." She wiped at her eyes and nose with her free hand. "Except that this woman is about to blow us up."

Simon looked up at Karst, who smiled at him. "No she's not," he said. He leaned in close to kiss Fleur's cheek, and spoke into her ear. "Hold tight." He flipped around on the seat, his restrained arm across his chest as he rested on his back. He pulled his legs in tight then pounded them into the back of the chair with all his strength. It cracked, and the armrest, bolted to the floor, pulled away from the plastic chair-back. Simon yanked the loop of his plastic handcuff free and spun back around, standing up, to grab the white box from Karst's hands.

"Buh—" spluttered Karst, looking at her empty hands.

Fleur freed herself from the bisected chair and kissed Simon on the cheek. "God, you're great," she said with a smile, and an ironic touch. The last thing she ever wanted was to be in need of rescuing. For the first time in weeks she had the chance to take control, and she had every intention of doing it. She turned to Karst. "Okay, you stick insect in a business suit, get walking." She pointed down at the open tank, and gave the woman a hefty shove to get her started.

~

"You're going to help us," said Hugh to Rudiger.

"Oh no, I don't think so," he replied. He stuck a hand into his sportscoat, pulled out his inhaler, and shoved it roughly into Hugh's face, trying to get it into his mouth. Hugh fell backwards toward an opening in the boards. He struggled and twisted his face away. His back pressed against the buttons that extended the gangplank and raised the podium.

Rudiger pushed the small tube and mouthpiece into Hugh's face with one hand and grabbed the back of his head with the other. They continued this awkward dance out onto the blue astroturf gangplank. Hugh tripped backwards and Rudiger followed him down, pressing on his chest with a knee.

Sprague jumped in, pushing at Rudiger's arms until his own bent strangely. Frustrated, he pulled back and punched Rudiger in the nose. Rudiger fell flailing to the gangplank, his upper body hanging awkwardly over the gangplank's edge while blood streamed from his nose into the water. Hugh scrambled forward, grabbed the inhaler from Rudiger and tossed it into the tank.

Rudiger sat up and stared in shock, looking down at his bloody tie. He looked at Sprague for an explanation, while a giant, slick black and white head rose from the water, exposing a pink mouth full of thumb-sized teeth. It snapped at the blood-tinted water, catching nothing but the small metal inhaler, then submerged.

Hardt stood at the gangplank's entrance, holding his gun. He wasn't sure where to start; he wanted to shoot them all.

"Frank," said Karst's voice behind him. Hardt turned to see her. She didn't have the box anymore, Simon did.

"Give me your gun," said Fleur. Hardt hesitated, but Simon held up the white box. Behind them, the killer whale jumped from the water, twitching strangely, then splashed down. Hardt handed his gun to Fleur. She took it, unsure how to handle it, but clearly happy to try. She pointed it at Hardt. "Get in the water," she said.

"But I—"

"Get in the water!"

The little man gingerly lowered himself into the tank. "How does that feel?" she said. "Are you nervous? You should be. You said it yourself: that whale likes meat." Hardt looked down at the distorted image of his legs kicking in the water. "I hope it eats you. You deserve it." She looked at Karst. "And you. Get out on that podium." Fleur wagged the gun in her direction, and she obeyed. "I don't know who the rest of you are, but I take it you're with Simon. Let's go." She motioned for them to follow her off the gangplank. On dry land, she looked for the controls, which Hugh gladly pointed out. She pressed the button to retract the gangplank, watching Karst's face elongate with fear as her only hope of rescue pulled away. Hardt was too busy treading water to help her.

"I've been waiting weeks for this moment." The others looked at her, stunned. "So what now? What do we do with that box?" Simon looked down at the thing in his hands. "Oh, good," said Fleur, as three ushers joined them. Hugh had seen two of them before, and the third... looked exactly like the other two. This was not right, he thought. One of the ushers sniffed at Rudiger's bloodied front, then turned to the others and a growling sound issued from somewhere, not quite his mouth. Another gave his head a scratch, a round flurry of fingers that made his blank face fall off in a pink lump. Beneath was another face with a tiny sloped forehead and jutting lower jaw full of dice-like teeth.

"Oh no," said Hugh, staring into the same subhuman features he'd seen in Rudiger's Costa Rican basement.

"Get that," said Rudiger to one of the ushers, pointing at the box Simon held. "Don't Let Them Push the Button," he said, as if telling them the name of a game. Another of the creatures scooped Rudiger up in its arms and carried him off.

"Wait," said Sprague, "you have to help us." Rudiger flipped a dismissive wave over his shoulder.

Fleur's mouth hung open as the other two creatures pulled off their masks. "Fleur," said Hugh to her, "we need him. He's the doctor who created us. Come back here!" he yelled, starting toward the doctor. But one of Lucy's gangling brothers stepped in his way.

Fleur raised the gun and shook it. The thing snarled at her, showing all of its blocky teeth. She held the gun out, but the usher slapped it from her hand and leapt at her. She jumped one side to avoid its grasp, and ran away down an aisle. "Simon!" she yelled.

Simon handed the box to Hugh and chased after her. The third usher raised its arms — their hairy lengths extending from its white shirt — and gave a feral shriek. Hugh looked at Sprague, shrugged, and held the white box out. The thing snatched it away, pleased to have won the game. Hugh and Sprague ran after Simon.

Fleur emerged from a metal exit door and bolted out into the parking lot. But the outsized usher caught her and raised her into the air. It rolled her under its arm and gambolled away with its prize to find its owner.

Simon burst from the exit door. They were nowhere to be seen. Hugh and Sprague joined him. "Where is she?" asked Hugh.
"I don't know," said Simon.

~

The cave-usher's joy at capturing the white box was broken by Hardt's voice. "Put that down," he said. Streams of water poured from his clothes and his hair. He held out his drilled silver pipe gun.

"Get it! Get it!" screamed Karst from her podium. The whale surfaced behind her, examining her with one of its eight-ball eyes.

"I'll kill you if you don't put that box down," said the assassin. The monster's face looked at Hardt, puzzled, then down at the box. With its giant thumb, it flicked the box's clear plastic cover open and uttered its first word: "Button."

~

The aquarium shattered like a dropped ceramic bowl, its sides bursting with roiling clouds of fire. The fire changed to a torrent of black smoke as the building, sans aquarium, lost a third of its base. Hugh watched the jutting blocks of the apartments tumble sideways into the cloud. Floor after floor of the cubes fell away.

As his apartment dropped from the sky, Hugh was surprised to find himself thinking about his socks.

Chapter 23

"Simon, it's not your fault," said Hugh. "I've seen one of those creatures before, and they're tough. Fleur wasn't prepared for it — it's not like she's had a chance to get used to — hell, sasquatches and mammoths and people like Lyle and the others like you have."

"Thanks," said Lyle, scratching his chin as he brought a beer from the kitchen for Simon. They were all gathered around him. Sprague was their leader by unspoken agreement, but Simon brought fun to their cottage hide-out, and none of them liked seeing him upset like this.

"That's twice I've let her down."

"You didn't know the first time. You thought it was her decision," offered Sprague. Simon looked up with sad-dog eyes, determined not to be consoled.

Trineh piped up with determination. "Hugh, you know Rudiger better than any of us. Where do you think he'd take Fleur?"

Hugh threw his hands in the air. "I have no idea. It's not like he planned on her coming along. But now that it's happened I'm sure he'll turn it to his advantage." He paced to the patio doors and looked out at the moonlit trees. "And we don't even know what he's up to here."

"Assuming he's up to something," said Trineh.

"I think that's a safe assumption." Hugh faced the others. "Rudiger's operations in Costa Rica were destroyed, his main focus outside of Canada. He hasn't been back here long enough to set up anywhere other than—" his mind produced the image of a building. "Indigenics' head office."

~

Hugh dug through the stacks of papers on Nadine's desk, which hadn't been touched since she'd interviewed him to spy on Rudiger and his team. He wondered if anyone even knew that she was dead. Collapsing inside, he turned and sat on the edge of the desk. *Ed, Helena*. He'd barely had a chance to think about them. A wash of feelings came over him.

Hugh looked across the room where Simon was sticking little disks into Nadine's video player. At least he had Simon back in his life, if that was a good thing.

Simon looked up, over his shoulder, catching Hugh's eye. "You okay?" he asked. Hugh shrugged with feigned nonchalance, but couldn't do it convincingly. Didn't want to. He bit his lip. Simon handed a disk to Trineh, who rummaged beside him, and went to Hugh. He held Hugh's shoulders and looked him in the eye. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, you know, the usual. I saw my apartment get blown up with all my stuff in it yesterday, I'm a clone of my best friend, and a bunch of people I became friends with in Costa Rica are dead." He dropped his head to his chest, and Simon pulled him close. "What makes me feel the strangest is that this is all that really matters, that you're here."

"I am, Hugh, you know that."

Hugh pulled his head away. "Yeah, I know. But I don't know for how long."

Trineh yipped and jumped up. "I found it!" The screen on the floor flashed images of Indigenics' building, the pronged nautilus-shell shape.

"Yeah, I saw that in the newsreel Nadine showed me," said Hugh.

"Yes, but look," said Trineh with a wily smile. She touched the screen, and a console popped up, marked "Lobby, Offices, Meeting Rooms, Libraries/Storage, Clean Room, Laboratories, Physical Engineering, Shipping/Receiving". Trineh touched "Labo-

ratories", and a window opened showing an architectural diagram. "Hugh, do your thing."

Hugh sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the console. He reached into his jacket and held his phone out behind him. "Someone order a pizza."

Chapter 24

"You're pregnant," said Rudiger.

Fleur rubbed her eyes. Her head felt stuff and achy, like she'd slept with it under a pillow. As she lowered her arm, she saw a small square of gauze taped to the inside of her elbow.

"I was about to let you go when that possibility occurred to me." The man leaned on a desk on the other side of the room, which looked like a doctor's office. Fleur found she was wearing nothing but a johnny-shirt, and quickly reached around to make sure she was covered in all the right places. The paper between her and the examination table crinkled. *Pregnant?* she wondered. She and Simon hadn't even seen each other for the past few weeks. *Before that*, she thought, *our sex life was, well, it had problems.*

Pancakes. She remembered the fight that culminated in a roll in the breakfast. That had to be when it happened. "Wait a second," she said to the man, "who are you and why do you care if I'm pregnant? Hugh said something about you being the one who created them. I thought you were a friend of theirs."

Rudiger adjusted his glasses and stood up. "Not exactly. I did create them, but they weren't intended to live. But that's immaterial now; they're here, and I believe that Hugh Willard may be the means to my completing a project I've been working on for a long time. I need the virus his body has created. There's just one thing in the way, and that's your husband, whose immune system will be able to create an antibody to that virus. So, I should say that I *thought* he was the only thing in my way, but now it turns out that you're pregnant. I'm quite confident that your husband will confer that kind of resistance to his offspring. So it will have to come out."

Fleur scurried backward on the table, holding herself.

"I am a doctor. You don't have to give me that look, I know what I'm doing."

Fleur sat up. "I'm not questioning your competence, you freak. You're talking about giving me—"

"I promise I'm not going to hurt you. I don't want to harm anyone unnecessarily. But this is progress, and no one has the right to stand in the way of progress. So if you cooperate with me, I'll make it as agreeable a situation as possible."

Fleur's jaw moved as her throat tried to form words.

"So, I'm afraid you're not going to be able to eat for twelve hours. Then we'll perform the procedure, and then I'll have you delivered anywhere you want to go."

Fleur looked around her. There was only one door, but there were lots of little sharp things in here, perhaps she could—

"All right," said the doctor, "I see that I can't leave you in here." He opened the door, and one of the gangly ushers, now wearing an orderly's uniform, loped into the room. "Could you please take Mrs. Williams to one of the clean-rooms? And provide her with a mattress and a bucket."

~

Fleur paced the room, looking at the ceiling and door, trying to figure a way out. Halfway up one wall was a window with several small portals, thick black rubber gloves hanging from them. Below the gloves was a workspace, but there was nothing there to grab, even if she did put her hands into a pair of the gloves. The workspace had an opening on one side. Darkness prevented her from seeing what lay beyond.

She looked at the flimsy cushion she'd been given for a bed, and the insult of a bucket beside. She walked to the window and pushed her hands into a pair of gloves, letting her head bang against the glass.

But this was a laboratory of some kind, she reasoned, not a prison. Something had to give.

She wiggled her fingers, feeling the thickness of the rubber. She tapped her head against the glass. The window wasn't thick. This room was likely made for conducting tests on tiny medical things. Everything here was sealed, but it wasn't tough. She pulled her hands out of the gloves, but pinched two fingers of her right hand together to turn the glove inside-out like a pocket. She pulled at it, but it wouldn't come free. Using her teeth, she worked at the rubber until she made a small hole, then tore the glove away from the window.

She turned the glove right-side-out and put it on. She remembered the self-defence classes she took once where the instructor, short of breath, complimented her on her punching ability.

The window shook as she hit the space between two of the portals. In her mind she'd pictured the whole sheet of glass coming down. Instead, she'd made a small crack. That was a good start. She gripped the portal with her gloved hand and pulled, adding her second hand over the back of the first. A foot-wide piece of glass came free, and she fell backward. The glass smashed on the floor beside her, and it occurred to her she should take some of it along, just in case she met another of the orderlies. She got back up and, piece by piece, cracked open an entrance and carefully manoeuvred her way through it. As she crawled along the workspace, tiny cubes of glass bit her knees and shins, and rubber fingers tickled her back. She sped up, plowing into the darkness ahead.

The only light in this new room came from buttons and monitors. Fleur had no idea what this room was for and didn't care. She let herself down and padded, still barefoot, to the door. She slowly opened it, looking carefully out into the hall. Just one orderly, and it looked straight at the door of the clean room. Apparently their comprehension was limited to pretty basic instructions. Fleur figured "Watch this door" was likely what was going on here.

She had no idea where to go, so she ran as lightly and as quickly as possible in the opposite direction from the orderly. She headed around several corners and down several hallways before getting completely lost. Voices echoed down the hall. She sprinted to the next door, which was locked. The next, however, gave as she twisted the handle. She ducked around it and locked it behind her, her glass-knife scraping the surface of the door.

She looked up, into the room. A pale, hot pink light shone from tubes overhead. The space was filled with long, shallow tubs. The tubs contained something shiny. She leaned closer to one of them and saw what looked like the stuff she pulled from a turkey every Thanksgiving: trays full of innards. They had the same rusty, dank smell, too. Organs connected to muscle connected to veins, all sitting in two inches of fluid. She gingerly poked with her naked left index finger at a kidney or something.

"Ungf," said a dull voice. She looked up, frightened, to see a rude head propped at the top of the basin, turning to look at her with what few muscles were attached to it. She stifled her scream with her gloved hand and looked around the room to see eleven other heads looking at her. They looked like the orderlies, but unfinished or stripped, reduced to parts.

Fleur dropped to the floor, keeping her mouth covered. The things in the organ-tubs made quiet lowing noises at each other for a minute, then fell silent again. She curled up, dropping her glass shard to the floor.

I'm not going to make it out of here, she thought.

No, she corrected herself, *she would,* and so would the baby inside her. She just needed help. She needed—

Simon.

He was coming, she assured herself. She would have to trust him. And wasn't that what he'd been asking for all along?

Chapter 25

Lyle gripped his arm near the shoulder. Blood ran from the slash in his black T-shirt. It wasn't serious — he'd be fine — but his sister's condition scared him.

Suz lay inert on the pavement in front of the giant shell-shaped glass and steel building. Her eyes were closed and her dark little mouth hung slightly open. Her jet-black pigtails stuck out from her head, the only rigid thing about her. The rest was a soft mass splaying out on the ground. Lyle pushed frantically at the buzzer beside the glass doors. "Hey!" he yelled. He banged on the glass. "Hey!"

A stocky woman in a security uniform got up from her desk. She crossed the lobby and put her head close to a panel beside the door, a light shone on her eye, then the door slid open. "What's the matter?"

"I need to see Rudiger," said Lyle. "It's my sister, she — I don't know what's wrong with her."

The woman looked at Suz lying on the ground, then back at Lyle. He seemed genuine. "Why don't I call you an ambulance?"

"No," said Lyle, "you don't understand. My sister and I, Rudiger made us, cloned us. It's a long story, but trust me, he did. We've been hiding so that no one would find us and turn us into lab rats. There are others, too. We were with them, but we escaped, and that's when this happened." He pulled open his sleeve to show her the injury. "Rudiger's the only one who can help us."

"Okay," she said, "I'll call him to see if he knows anything about this." She ran back to her beige marble oval of a desk and spoke hurriedly into the phone there. Lyle couldn't hear what she said. His arm itched and he scratched hard at the wound. The guard called to Lyle, "He'll be right down."

Lyle looked around at the lobby, a vast space with several solid platforms over an indoor lake of sorts. Clear plastic spheres hung randomly around the space with stylised plastic models of biological somethings inside them. He went outside to wait with his sister. She was too heavy for him to move. They'd barely made it here before she collapsed. He crouched next to her and put a hand on her face. She was cold.

Rudiger emerged from the bank of elevators at the far side of the 'lake' and paced across a walkway. He was flanked by two creatures like the ones Lyle saw at the aquarium, only these were dressed up as male orderlies — to ridiculous effect, given their proportions. When Rudiger reached the doors, he tipped his head for the sensor to read his eye, and the door opened. "Hello. What seems to be the problem?"

Lyle recalled the story, more insistently now that he had Rudiger's ear. Rudiger looked at Suz, then knelt at her side next to Lyle. He leaned his head next to her face. Puzzled, he pressed two fingers hard against her neck. He looked at Lyle, alarmed. "She's dead," he remarked, unsure how else to say it. "I'm sorry." He stood up and said quietly to one of his orderlies, "Take her inside, to the cold place." He turned back to Lyle. "Let's see what we can do for you and that arm." He addressed the other orderly-creature: "Take him to examining room five." The thing looked blankly at him. "The bright rooms? How many fingers do you have?" It held them up. "Five. That many. Take him to that room where I can help — what is your name?"

"Lyle."

"Where I can help Lyle."

~

Suz slowly opened her eyes. As she regained awareness, she realised she was very cold. *Cold, but alive*, she thought, sighing, her exhaled breath a faint fog. She still felt afraid, a hang-over from the last few moments before she'd slipped into the coma. She'd never gone that deep before, and wasn't sure if she could wake up.

The light in the room was dim, greenish. Her hands pressed against the aluminum table. She sat up and the papery green sheet fell from her, exposing her pale white flesh. As she pulled her legs close to her (a bit slimmer already), she saw the little tag on her toe. She clucked her tongue in disgust, wondering if Rudiger really saw so many of her in a day that she needed to be tagged. These scientific types were so boringly meticulous; she'd be happy to be rid of them when this was all over. She pulled the tag off and was about to throw it on the floor, but decided to keep it as a memento.

Her clothes were folded into a black pile on a metal table; she hopped down and put them on. Before putting on her black boots, she lifted the insole of the right boot and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

The other tables in the room were occupied by other bodies, and curiosity welled up in her. She tried to fight it, figuring it for a sick urge like gawking at a car wreck. But she couldn't help herself. With careful fingers, not wanting to touch whatever was underneath, she pulled at the paper blanket.

It had no face. A tiny forehead ridged over belly-button eyes, and a wide, gaping mouth that hung open. The body was small, hairless, and (she couldn't help herself) sexless. Where there should be features, there were just mounds or strange twists. One by one she uncovered the things on the tables. They were all broken in some way, unsuited for life. One had its head and gut carved completely out for some kind of examination. These were enough sights for a lifetime of nightmares, she figured, and headed for the door. *Please let it be unlocked*, she thought. *Why would anyone need to lock a morgue, anyway?*

She pushed down on the L-shaped handle. *Please, please, please*. With a 'clack' inside, it opened. She unfolded her piece of paper, and found a map from the morgue to the loading dock. So far, her part was going according to plan. Now she just had to get to the dock and let the others in while Lyle found Fleur.

~

The behemoth led Lyle down the hall, raising fingers to count as they passed the open doors of the brightly lit examination rooms. They'd assumed in making their plans that Fleur would be wherever they took him. But Lyle craned his head to look in each of the rooms they passed. No Fleur.

The thing turned to him, holding up its hand, all the fingers outstretched. It gave a prehistoric smile, then pushed Lyle into the room and stood dumbly in front of the door.

Lyle had only a few moments to look around the little room before Rudiger came in. "Let's see about that arm," he said, pulling on some stretchy blue gloves.

"Uh, it doesn't seem too bad now," said Lyle, holding the spot to cover it.

The doctor pulled away Lyle's fingers, exposing the spot. "I won't hur—" The doctor looked at him over his heavy-rimmed glasses, his eyes squinting in his squarish head. Lyle's face was a blank. "I know I saw a deep laceration in your arm. But there's barely a cut here now." He pulled away. "MX24," he said. "That's who you are. You were part of the experiment. Which means that your sister—" He called to the thing at the door. "That girl who came in with him! Get her! Do whatever you have to, but" — they needed very explicit directions, he remembered — "find her and bring her upstairs to the lab. The blue place." It would be easier to make a more definite decision up there, where more of his jug mind was concentrated. He took out his inhaler and sent a shot from it into his lungs for the meantime.

Lyle gave Rudiger a flash of his crooked smile then pushed him into the cluttered desk across the room. He ran for all he was worth, reaching into his pocket for the map he'd been given. He just had to find Fleur and they were home free.

~

Suz ran along the sterile white hallway as best she could. In order to slow her metabolism completely, she'd gone to the extreme of her weight range. She faced a split in the basement halls and looked at her small floorplan, confused. Not completely sure, she ran to her right.

She heard mutterings behind her, the combined sound of human voices and noises from the orderly-things. She picked up her pace, turning around corners just to get away from the sound. There was another fork ahead. Maybe she'd gone the wrong way, she thought. She'd turn left and head back. Still looking right as she rounded the corner, she bumped into someone. She yelped unconsciously and the other person made a startled noise, too. Suz found herself facing a woman in a pale blue johnny-shirt brandishing a small glass dagger in front of her.

"Fleur!" said Suz. The pictures she'd seen showed Fleur with a lot more clothing, but it was definitely her. "My name's Suz, I'm here with Simon."

"Oh, thank God," said Fleur.

"Don't get too thankful yet. We've still got to get out of here."

"How did you get in?"

"Later," said Suz. She pulled out her map. "Help me find the way to the loading dock."

Turning the map around between them as they went, they scuttled down the hall.

~

"Fleur!" said Simon. He jumped up onto the metal ledge of the dock and took her in his arms. She sighed deeply and hugged him with all her strength.

"Where's Lyle?" asked Hugh.

"I don't know," said Suz. "He was supposed to find Fleur, but obviously—" she pointed to the woman in question.

"This isn't good," said Sprague.

He looked to Trineh. She shrugged. "He's still in there. Do we wait for him before we go in?"

Sprague took the initiative. "Hugh's virus is wreaking havoc out there. We've got to find a treatment for it. We may never get access like this to the building again, so we've got to go now."

"I say we all go find Lyle," said Trineh, "and look for anything that might be valuable along the way. If we go together we won't get split up again, and we stand a better chance against Rudiger." She turned to Katy. "Want to give me a hand up?" As if she were nothing more than a bird, Katy lifted Trineh onto the loading dock ledge, then hoisted herself up.

Sprague and Hugh scrambled onto the ledge. "This is not good," repeated Sprague, as if it needed pointing out.

They passed from summer light to the cold bluish white of recessed fluorescents. "If anyone knows where they want to go," said Hugh, "I can tell you the way. Anyone?"

Fleur and Suz had heads full of things they'd rather not return to, but no alternate suggestions.

"Well, Hugh, you're the one who knows the floor plans. Where do you think we should go?" asked Sprague.

Hugh thought for a moment. "There's one blank area marked 'secure'."

"Sounds risky enough," said Trineh. "Even if Lyle isn't there, we'll probably find something useful. Clearly Rudiger's not going to help us."

Fleur held Simon's arm, pulling him back from the others as they walked.

"Simon," she said quietly to him, smiling, "I'm pregnant."

"Really?" he asked, beaming.

"Yup. Rudiger was going to — nevermind. You showed up in time. Thanks." She kissed him on the cheek.

Simon found himself suddenly not caring about viruses and such, wanting instead to bundle Fleur up and leave.

Hugh was surprised to notice that his hands were dry. He felt nervous enough, but this needed to be done, whatever they were doing here. He remembered the blank, staring looks of the Costa Rican villagers that late night when they took the boat to see them, and felt his stomach drop with dread: to think that he was the cause of that happening out there now in the city, possibly with no chance of a cure outside this building.. His conscience overcame his instinct to turn and follow the easy exit path in his mind. He promised himself, though, that this time he wouldn't lose any friends, whatever it might take to protect them.

They took to one of the emergency staircases; for sure they'd be watching the elevators. As they climbed, Fleur spoke. "I don't suppose it occurred to any of you to bring some sort of weapon with us."

"What? Like your piece of glass there?" said Suz.

"I was thinking of something a little more lethal."

Trineh explained. "Well, even something legal like a stun-gun requires a permit. That takes days to get. And most of us don't even have birth certificates."

"Okay," said Fleur, "except that we're about to deliver ourselves into the lap of the one guy you were trying to avoid all this time. Just a thought."

"How about this?" said Katy, pulling a fire extinguisher from the wall.

"It's something," said Fleur.

Hugh opened the metal door and stepped into the hall. The far side of the hallway was a giant arc of glass. They followed the towering beige inner wall that angled toward the centre of the building. "This way," said Hugh, pointing to the left. They followed him.

"If it's marked 'secure'," said Fleur, "why do we think that we can get in there anyway?" The others glared at her. "Sorry."

They heard the sound of heavy, dull footfalls along with the sharp clack of heels. Looking behind them, they saw five of the big creatures in orderly uniforms and two human security people. They ran, following the curve of the building. Ahead of them, though, was another complement of six of Rudiger's beasts with two more security guards.

Katy looked at the fire extinguisher in her hand, then at the others, embarrassed. She sprayed a cloud of gas and foam, but the orderlies stepped through it. She hit one of them with the extinguisher, sending it sprawling into the foam, but three others grabbed her and held her tight. The security guards and the other creatures closed in. Katy struggled helplessly. "Sorry guys," she said.

"It's okay, Katy," said Simon, holding Fleur close.

"Well, what's he going to do? Kill us?" she asked.

Fleur, Suz, and Hugh said, "Yes."

~

The room had moulded white plastic walls. Along one side was a window looking into another white room, but that was bathed in blue light the colour of the liquid in a

barber's comb-sterilising jar. Hugh saw something he recognised inside that room, a glass jug with a red sphere and blue rectangle hanging over its side like a pair of lenses. Thin mechanical arms moved along tracks overhead, delivering things to and from it. "It's—" started Hugh.

"Yes, that's Augie," said Rudiger. "The computer who figured out the workings of the human genome, which allowed all of you to come to be." Rudiger checked his pocket for his inhaler. He took it out and shook it, but it was overly light. When he tried to use it, it was empty. *No matter*, he thought, he'd get another from next door in a moment. He could feel his faculties waning as he was forced to rely on what little was left of the self in this brain. Rudiger waved to the jug.

An arm waggled in response, then whirled out of the room through a small slot in the door, past them on some errand.

Lyle had been caught while searching for Fleur, and was with them now, as yet unharmed. Their collective future, however, was uncertain, as four of Rudiger's creatures stood in the room with them. The human security guards who might have had consciences were left outside.

"Hugh can't leave here. Nor can Simon or Fleur. I don't care what happens to the rest of you. You were accidents, expendable at the time, and expendable now. So it's up to you if you want to leave here alive or not."

"Nice," said Suz.

Simon looked around the room. *Okay*, he thought, *another game*. He took a few deep breaths to centre himself in his body. He closed his eyes and felt the situation. Then he opened them, ready.

He took a few long running steps toward one of the orderlies. He jumped and ran up the front of it, then kicked himself off its head, sending it backward into the wall with enough force to knock it unconscious. He twisted in the air, landing beside Rudiger and grabbing him around the neck. He twisted Rudiger's head at an awkward angle. "Okay," he said to the lumbering orderlies still standing, "back off, or I'll break his neck." He gave a slight twist to demonstrate, and Rudiger moaned.

In the next room, all the mechanical arms stopped their movement. Hugh looked in at the jug. "Uh-oh," he said aloud, "get ready." He stood poised, not sure what he'd have to defend himself against. *Pinching?* wondered Hugh. The arms looked pretty frail.

In an instant, like some kind of mechanical polka, the arms flew out to the sides of the room and picked up syringe attachments, then moved just as quickly back to the centre of the room, where they sucked up liquid from the jug. The arms whipped about then coursed into their room through the slot in the door.

To their surprise, though, the metal twigs focused themselves on the orderlies, executed an array of flashing jabs to their necks and arms, then retreated back to the jug-room. Hugh looked at Rudiger, who seemed confused himself. The orderlies slumped, dazed from the attack, bleeding slightly from the tiny holes in their skin.

One of the orderlies raised his head. *Something's different*, noticed Hugh. As it looked around the room, there was a spark behind the eyes that he'd never seen before. Instead of cow-like reaction, there was now a consciousness. The other orderlies were undergoing the same transformation, too.

The three creatures grabbed Hugh, two by his arms, one by his legs. The door to the jug's blue room slid open and they ran inside with him. Katy leapt to help him, but the door closed before she reached it.

Rudiger looked flummoxed. He was alone with the human clones, one of whom was twisting his neck in a most uncomfortable way. "I—"

A synthetic voice spoke over an intercom that piped into their room. "I don't need you anymore. This one's mind has more capacity to house me than yours ever

did. And combined with the virus that's in him, I can expand my consciousness, as it were, without limits." The speaker popped off, then on again, "Do with him what you like."

"B-but—" Rudiger spluttered.

Hugh struggled against his captors. Katy banged against the room's window, but it was too thick even to shake with her blows. One of the orderlies picked up a metal implement — a cross between a flower and a claw — and dipped in into the jug. It pressed a button on the handle of the flower and the liquid in the jug, flowing with tiny flecks of blue and pink that glowed in the room's light, lowered as the device filled up. The orderly moved to Hugh and pressed the device to his neck. It clamped on. A needle protruded from the centre and screwed into Hugh's skin. Hugh gritted his teeth as it stuck deep and delivered its contents.

The others could do nothing but watch as Hugh's expression changed. He looked confused, then groggy, then he slumped in the orderlies' arms. They placed him in a chair in the corner of the room.

Rudiger was still in shock. Simon relaxed the grip on his neck. "What should we do?" asked Simon.

"Well," said Sprague, "we should get out of here while we can."

"What about Hugh?" asked Simon.

"I think they killed him," said Suz.

"No," interjected Rudiger limply, dejectedly. He was split inside himself. "He's still alive." What was he saying? He was supposed to be there, part of the jug's consciousness when it propagated itself. The Rudiger-mind was so faint, just a whisper of thoughts. The jug-mind was dying off, though, cut off from its source. Why, he wondered, would he do this to himself? Jug-mind showed him the truth of it. It made sense. But the trace of Rudiger-mind was very unhappy about being left out of the work that he'd created. And he knew there was no way back into the plan. This was progress.

"You can save him," said Rudiger, "but not from here." He struggled against Simon. "Let me go, or you'll never get past the guards outside."

Katy pointed into the blue room. "What about those creatures?" she asked. "They know what happened."

"They'll be dead in fifteen minutes. Their brains can't handle that level of activity for long."

They headed out into the hallway, where Rudiger dismissed the guards and orderlies. Simon looked back over his shoulder at Hugh's inert body in the chair.

Chapter 26

His eyes still shut, Hugh recollected what had just happened. But there was more. As he reached into his mind, there was something other than the usual infinite shoebox of images and facts, feelings and memories. There was linkage, understanding, an intelligence not his own. The dossiers that he'd read about the project that created him, he understood these now in a way he never could before. The whole of his genome lay out like braided strings of coloured beads, and he knew what every bead was for, how it interacted with all the others. The virus in him — he saw its makeup, knew how it attacked the centre of consciousness in others, even knew the cure.

Simon.

When Simon's immune system detected the particular protein on the virus' surface, this gene and that one and that one would weave together an antibody. It likely already had, and it was present in his blood, his saliva. His unborn child, the girl that Fleur carried, had this resistance, too.

So they would have to die.

No. That wasn't his thought. He still had his mind, could feel the difference between the jug's reasoning and his own, and could reject the other thoughts. He knew full well now what it was up to.

Even his own thoughts — he found himself watching them, wondering at the idea that he wasn't his thoughts, his memories, or ideas. That 'him' inside was something other than the workings of his mind. Would the jug actually be able to displace that? Wasn't that the soul he'd talked about with Simon?

Simon. He would protect Simon at any cost, he insisted to the jug-thoughts.

He was sore. He opened his eyes and felt the wound in his neck. His wrists were now secured to the arms of the chair. Three of Rudiger's orderlies lay on the floor. They were dead, their feeble brains destroyed. Hugh knew this without trying to figure it out.

There was the jug. That stupid, inanimate water pitcher that was ruining his life.

"I gave you this life. I created you," corrected its synthesised voice, the thought behind it echoing faintly somewhere at the back of his mind.

"Rudiger and Karst created me. You worked out the math," said Hugh.

"You were a stepping-stone in our understanding," said the jug. "You want to know the answer to The Big Question? You want to know why were you created? No reason at all. It was just an experiment."

"From your perspective, maybe."

"And from your perspective?" asked the tinny voice. "If you could answer that, I might have second thoughts about doing this. Can you tell me what's lost if I destroy your mind?"

"I don't think you can do that." Surely, thought Hugh, there was some essential part of him beyond biology. He felt the thought plucked from his mind like an apple from a tree.

"What about Rudiger?" responded the jug. Was it answering the thought or what Hugh had said? "He's been dead for years. There were traces of him I couldn't root out. But with this virus you've brought me, I'll be able to completely unseat the consciousness resident in any being and replace it with mine, neuron by neuron, gene by gene." Hugh saw it in his mind. And the harvesting of experience that would follow, as he infected others with himself then culled the information they gathered, adding it to the central mind that would live in Hugh. In this way, the jug would experience everything. Cell rejuvenation was no big trick for the jug, either, so he would live indefinitely. *Wouldn't that be nice?*, the thought promised him. But it would not be

him. Like Rudiger, he would be dead, a shell animated like a puppet by this other thing.

In the next room, the remaining orderly rose to its feet. Through its interface with the machinery, the jug willed mechanical arms loaded with needles its way. A flurry of blows stung the creature into awareness. Hugh felt something extra, something unexpected by the jug: *an echo*. Not only did the thing have an awareness of the jug's intentions written on the blank slate of its mind, a communication of sorts continued between them. The jug could not account for this.

The thing needed no instructions. It knew to find the others, especially Simon and his wife, and to kill them. Hugh tried to override the thought, but his link to the thing was too weak. The creature took several of the devices like the one on Hugh's neck, filled them from the jug, and snapped them shut like giant silver fennel seeds. Putting them in its pockets, it left the room.

A small door opened in the white plastic wall, and a fat orange cat ambled into the room. A metal arm whirled over to it and picked it up by the scruff of the neck, then dropped it on the table in front of the jug.

Hugh felt an intense hatred from the jug.

"Yes," it said, "Miss Dribbles here is my only obstacle to complete awareness. No matter what I try, the damned thing defies me. Such a will. Ah, well, the cats will have to go." The speech synthesiser made a squealing noise and the cat, startled, ran back to its little door. The jug willed it open and shut in just enough time for the cat to get out.

Hugh's felt an immense tiredness. His mind wanted to fold itself up and rest, as it had so often before when Hugh gave himself over to sleep. But he had to stay awake. He recalled his tenth birthday, bike-riding with Simon, then Simon sleeping over at his house. He didn't want to go to sleep. He stayed up all night, even though it made him feel sick the next day, because he didn't want his birthday to end.

He had so much more to lose now.

Simon. If I could get to Simon—

"This process is irreversible," said the jug, the thought originating in the expressionless container beside him. "You know that. Rudiger is already dead, or will be soon. And you, if you try to remove me from your body now, that memory of yours will be wiped completely clear."

There was something else.

"Yes?" said the jug.

Water, something about water.

"You didn't think I would depend on you alone to transmit the virus?"

The jug had already synthesised Hugh's virus and changed it, adding itself to the mix. That was what was in the jug and what was being injected into his neck, and it was going to be pumped into the waterways, too.

The lobby. The water there was the delivery system. Hugh struggled to get out of his chair.

The restraints around his wrists opened. The room's door slid open.

"Go ahead," said Augie's synthetic voice. "I'm suffused through your bloodstream. 'You' as you know you will be gone within the hour."

Hugh stood and plucked out the wires dangling in the jug, electronic protests shrieking until the last was pulled out. He put it under his arm and left the room.

Chapter 27

Trineh placed the vial of Simon's blood in the centrifuge and turned it on. The machine whirled it around vigorously. Katy held Rudiger up; his awareness was fading and he breathed in thin, troubled measures. He pointed across the small laboratory. "The fluid for my inhalers is in that cabinet. It will work as a carrier for the vaccine."

Sprague opened the white enamelled cupboard. "This?" he asked, holding up a large plastic container. Rudiger nodded groggily. Sprague handed it to Trineh, and continued digging through the supplies there. He produced a container like a combination of a thermos and a Howitzer shell. "This will be able to hold the solution under pressure."

"The vaccine will treat Augie's variant of my original virus. But you'll still have to get it deep into the vortex where the mixing occurs, or the whole solution will stay at the top of the water."

"We'll worry about that when we get there," said Simon. Fleur held gauze to the spot at the crook of his arm where Trineh had drawn the blood.

"They know what I know," said Rudiger, "so they'll be prepared for your trying to do this. If it were me — and it is — I would send as many of the organ-dogs as possible to stop you."

"Organ-dogs?" asked Fleur.

"Those simple men you saw with me. Their original purpose was to provide organs for people needing transplants. Xenotransplants from animals have always been a risk — rejection, cross-species diseases. It turned out, though, that they made nice companions."

"You're deeply warped," said Suz.

Lyle watched at the door. "So how long until we do this?" he asked.

"Twenty minutes or so to extract what we need and synthesise enough of the solution," said Trineh. "How are you doing?" she asked Rudiger.

He mumbled a response. His mind was breaking down. Weakly, he held up his inhaler. "Use this— for your friend." He pointed to a small machine with a compressor used to fill it. "But his mind— I— Augie will have injected him by now. If you use this on him... It'll already be all through his mind. When Augie is erased, everything else will go with it."

Simon grabbed the small silver vial from him. "We can't do that to him."

The doctor shrugged. "Then Augie will use him for as long as he likes. And he won't even know that he's dead, like me."

Sprague took the vial from Simon and filled it. He gave it back to Simon, pressing it into his palm. Simon looked at the thing, confused and hurt. Fleur wrapped an arm around him.

"I love him," said Simon.

"I know," said Fleur. "I've always known."

"I mean, I love you, and I'm going to be with you. And now—" he looked down at her stomach.

"It's okay," she said, "as long as I don't lose you. All this stuff that's happened... I care so much about you. And I trust you. We'll figure out something. Just don't hurt me, okay? Or I will kill you."

"Okay," said Simon, kissing her on the forehead.

Trineh crouched by the chair where Suz sat. "How are you doing?"

"Good," said Suz.

"How was it?"

"What?"

"Dying."

Suz smirked. "You mean, like, was there a white light and a tunnel and stuff? I can't tell you. It was just like sleeping. I wasn't really dead. Why?"

Trineh stood and smiled. "Just curious. No reason." She walked back to the lab equipment holding her side, continuing to smile, though her eyes squinted with pain.

~

The lobby was empty. Sprague clutched the silver vaccine bombshell as he walked from the bank of elevators out along the stone walkway. Simon and Katy stood with Fleur and Trineh, taking a protective stance. Suz followed, more slim and agile now, helping Rudiger walk, while Lyle hopped over to another stone platform further out in the man-made lake to investigate this mysterious water. It just looked like water to him.

Lyle fell backward onto the platform in shock as the surface of the lake fell away with a great sucking noise. The bottom opened up, forming a whirlpool just in front of him. Its waterfall edges streamed over mechanical workings like the spiral blades of a schoolroom pencil sharpener.

"Heads up," said Hugh's voice. They saw him walking from the elevators, the jug cradled in his arm. Lyle craned his head to look up. White plastic pipes lowered from the heights of the ceiling above the whirlpool. A deep gurgling sound came from them, then streams of ooze fell from them into the water. The blades below spun, and the ooze blended with the water.

"You might not want to stand there," said Hugh to Lyle, as a mist rose from the vortex, where the last of the ooze whorled about with the water. Lyle took a few running steps and jumped back onto the main walkway.

Katy and Simon poised, ready to rush Hugh, when from the elevator doors behind him emerged a throng of twenty organ-dogs. There seemed to be two leaders, still dressed as orderlies, while the half-dressed others followed dumbly behind. One leader held an arm around the other, but he couldn't help as the thing collapsed on the floor, flailing wildly, banging his fists, feet, and head on the stone before going limp.

They'd been pacing themselves, rationing the injections, isolating one of them to carry the awareness until it destroyed the creature's brain and needed to be passed on.

Hugh looked at the remaining leader, furrowing his brows. The leader nodded and dug in the pockets of the fallen organ-dog for the silver syringes. He passed them out amongst the others, who willingly flicked the flower shapes open and drove them into one another's necks. One by one, they shook their heads and raised them, something cunning present in their eyes. They clambered behind Hugh, waiting for instruction.

"Get that container!" said Hugh, and the things flowed around him toward his friends.

His friends.

The jug suffocated his thoughts. But he was still there. He was frightened: he didn't want to die. He looked down at the jug in his arms, wanting nothing more than to hurl it at the floor. But he didn't have enough control over his body to do that.

He turned his thoughts to the organ-dogs. His will flashed out to them, giving a wordless instruction to protect his friends. Three of the organ-dogs turned to look at him, puzzled. *Yes!* he thought. The dogs, who had almost reached Sprague, turned back and attacked the closest of the others. One pounded his oversized fists into another's face, throwing them both into the water. They struggled with all their might, but the vortex quickly pulled them into its depths and mulched them with a mechanical squeal. The other two dogs tore at their victims' faces and throats. Hugh felt

something new from them, a wave of fear, an urge to preserve themselves. With another blast of thought, he reminded them that they were already dying. His defenders pulled their prey with themselves off the platform, and were soon consumed by the mixing machinery.

The jug-mind asserted itself again from its glass container, and pressed the dogs toward Hugh's friends. Hugh took the direction of the thought as his opening, and forced his body into motion toward Simon and the others. They would save him.

As the first organ-dog reached him, Simon crouched and sent it over his shoulder to land on the floor behind him. He whirled his leg around, sweeping the feet out from beneath the next of the dogs. Already the first was getting up again, but as it stood, Simon raised himself and kicked it in the chest, sending it off the platform into the water.

Katy clobbered her two fists against the sides of her attacker's head. It looked dazed and fell. As the next prepared to step forward, she ran like a quarterback, driving her shoulder into it, forcing it to the ground, where she punched it senseless. Another of the dogs, though, grabbed her by the wrists and pulled her off the creature. With a quick movement, she twisted her hands free, grabbed the giant's own arms, and kicked him in the groin. The thing, however, did not react as she expected, not having the parts she was aiming for. They stood there, wrestling, locked together.

Lyle ran and jumped at the crowd, knocking several of the creatures down.

Hugh squeezed through the opening Lyle created. Trineh caught him. She pulled the jug free from his hands. He shook his head to protest like a child with a beloved toy, but she was insistent and wrested it free.

The jug-mind, half from Hugh's body and half from the jug, called to the nearest organ-dog, which faced Simon. The message was a simple cry for help. The thing pushed Simon aside and ran toward Trineh.

"Jerome!" she said to Sprague. He looked, and she gestured for the container in his hands. He looked confused. "Just give it to me!" Sprague tossed it as the behemoth closed in on her. She caught it awkwardly in her free arm like a first-time football player. She took the pressurised shell and stuffed it with a clunk into the half-empty jug, then took several quick steps and hopped over to the platform by the whirlpool.

The organ-dog followed, but as it prepared to jump, Sprague gave it a shove, sending it into the water and down the hole. It made a feral roar as the machinery ground it to death.

"What are you doing?" asked Sprague.

"Rudiger said we had to make sure this solution got deep into the mixer." She took a step toward the ledge. "Jerome, I love you, but I can't go on living like this, not even for you," she said, opening her arms to indicate her body.

"I—" he started to protest. But he understood. He couldn't let her suffer indefinitely — as she would, with her strength and her resistance to the growths that preyed on her. "I love you, too."

"Stop!" yelled Hugh's voice. The organ-dogs all stopped their fighting, and everyone looked at Trineh.

She smiled, and stepped backward over the ledge into the gaping water-mouth. Her weight pulled her deep into the void. As the underwater works crushed the pressurised container, they exploded with a plume of water and a shockwave that knocked the others to the ground. Water fell like rain from above. The treated solution from the vortex flowed out into the water system as the remaining equipment fell into the opening and blocked it. The small lake filled in on itself again.

Fleur and Suz picked up Rudiger and ran with him toward the front of the lobby with them, where the ground was solid and the front door beckoned. Lyle and

Katy followed with Sprague in tow. Simon looked at Hugh, still inert like the organ-dogs, waiting to see if he'd somehow been freed.

Hugh's head looked up.

The organ-dogs' heads looked up.

Hugh stood.

The organ-dogs stood.

Hugh turned his head, looking with menace at Simon.

Simon ran.

The jug filled Hugh's mind. Every corridor of thought he turned down had a dead-end. The other presence dazzled and distracted him with endless thoughts. Meanwhile, it used his mouth to yell a wordless sound, and the small army of remaining organ-dogs charged, heading toward the other clones.

"Simon," said Sprague, "you have to use Rudiger's inhaler on him!" Simon recalled the device, and pulled it from his jacket.

Rudiger fixated on the thing, and lurched toward Simon. He knew the thing so well, that silver cigar tube shape fitted into the darker metal mouthpiece. It had sustained him for years. He reached, and, surprising Simon, who focused on the rushing creatures ahead, took it back into his hand.

"Hey!" said Simon. He and the others looked at Rudiger. "I need that."

"No," said Rudiger, "there will be no cure." He walked toward the throng that lumbered across the bridge. "It may be too late for this body, but I don't just live in here," he said, tapping a finger to his head. "I'm in here, and in those creatures, and in your friend over there. And he still has the virus that will ensure I'll go on living."

Simon reached for the inhaler, but the organ-dogs surrounded Rudiger. The doctor's body spasmed, and he fell to the floor. He looked at the inhaler in his hand, then raised it, and smashed it into the floor. The silver vial dented. Rudiger lifted it, and pounded it against the stone tile until it finally released its contents, spraying them in a wet circle two feet around his hand.

Rudiger righted himself and laughed. But as he reached his full height, his eyes opened with shock. His hands flew to his head and clutched his temples. He screamed and his body shook. "Help me!" he cried, falling to the ground again. He rolled back and forth, looking to Hugh. "Please, help me!"

Hugh was allowed to see this. He felt a wave of revulsion from the jug toward the man, the weak human container it had been forced to use as its entrance to the world, dying at regular intervals and having to revivify itself since the man couldn't support its life. A thought flashed out to the creatures that surrounded the doctor.

The organ-dogs grabbed him, each taking hold of some part of the doctor's body, which jerked now with the force of a violent seizure. Then each of them pulled. The man screamed. When the creatures' grips gave way, they grabbed again, and pulled.

From where they stood, the clones could see only a flurry of the organ-dogs' limbs flashing red as they raised and fell around the doctor, hurling pieces of him into the air around them to land on the walkway or in the water. Beyond them, Hugh stood, looking at the sight, expressionless.

"What are we going to do?" asked Katy. Lyle fussed with the door mechanism, staring into it without result.

Hugh moved to his footmen, who stood now, wiping the mess of Rudiger's remains from their hands and mouths. He pointed toward the huddled group of clones. "Bring me Simon," he said.

His mouth said it, but inside, Hugh struggled to gain control. The whole of the jug-mind rested in him, now that the jug itself was gone. It was very strong. And it planned to use his own body to kill Simon. Simon's immunity was the most immedi-

ate threat to the jug-mind's being; the baby would easily be dealt with later. The jug's mistake pleased Hugh: there was no way that he could ever beat Simon.

The organ-dogs rushed the clones, who had gathered around Simon. The dogs didn't care about the blows they received, and paced past the clones' resistance. One each took Fleur, Suz, and Lyle. Sprague struggled against two of them, twisting strangely in their grip, his bones giving him unnatural flexibility. Still, they overpowered him. Katy hurled blows at the four who cornered her, but they kept her from defending Simon.

Five more faced Simon. One of the dogs approached him, and he kicked it in the jaw as he flipped backwards out of its reach. It staggered back, stunned. Two grabbed him from the sides, but he took hold of their large hands and twisted them, forcing the creatures to move away from him with their long arms behind their backs. If they resisted, he could break their arms with a push. Two others circled behind and grabbed his legs. He fell, but held himself off the floor by holding onto the arms in front of him. This, unfortunately, broke them, and the creatures pulled away in pain. He dropped to the hard floor, and the two who had his legs pounced on him, then held him tight as they brought him to Hugh.

The two friends faced each other, just a few feet apart. Hugh lunged for Simon's throat, catching him off-guard. He gripped tight, and Simon grasped at Hugh's hand. Hugh worried: Simon would defend himself, right? If he did, the jug was sunk.

Simon forced Hugh's hand off his neck; there was no doubt he was stronger. Hugh reached again, but Simon blocked his hand. Hugh then moved in closer.

Hugh could see into the jug's mind. It began its life as a DNA computer, and still, in him, was capable of performing a trillion calculations in an instant. It had already imagined Simon's every possible move. As Simon dodged or tried to strike back, Hugh felt himself move in perfect unison, hitting Simon or evading his blows effortlessly.

Simon twisted, whirling away to the side. He leapt to the platform in the water. Hugh ran and jumped, somersaulting through the air. He'd never done that before in his life. He marvelled as he landed easily, springing on the balls of his feet, but he knew that the jug had worked out exactly how to use his brain to fire the right muscles in the right sequence. It was like finally becoming Simon.

He punched at Simon, who blocked with his forearm and twisted around to grab Hugh in a headlock. Hugh struggled, trying to grab some part of Simon, but he couldn't.

"Don't do this, Hugh," said Simon into his ear.

Hugh ducked down and pulled Simon over his shoulder. He straightened his legs, lifting Simon into the air, then slammed him down on the stone platform. Simon groaned. Hugh dropped and put the bone of his forearm against Simon's throat.

"Don't," gasped Simon. He looked sideways toward the front door, toward Fleur.

Hugh followed his gaze. He squinted his eyes, and the organ-dogs there looked back at him. "Kill them," he whispered. The creatures lifted their giant hands and bared their huge teeth as they moved in on their prey. He knew they still had enough life in them to finish the task.

"Hugh!" said Simon.

Hugh stared into Simon's eyes. *Those eyes. That face.* He'd been looking at this face all his life. It was more familiar than his own. Simon was the dearest thing in his world.

Something flashed in his mind, a piece of logic stolen from the jug-mind's deductive ability.

"Kiss me," said Hugh.

"What?" said Simon, struggling against the arm at his neck.

"The antibodies are in your saliva."

"But Hugh, if I do that, it'll wipe out your mind."

"No, just my memories. Without them, I'll still be me... somehow." Hugh conjured up as much of his will as he could. He took control of his arm, and pulled it away. Then he directed his mind at the organ-dogs, and froze them in their tracks.

"Simon, it's our only chance."

"But, Hugh, if I do, you'll forget—"

"I know. I'll forget you." A tear fell from his eye and landed beside Simon's head. "But I have to, Simon. If I don't forget you, I'll never have a life of my own."

Simon frowned, then smiled through tears of his own. "I love you, Hugh. I'll remember for both of us." He craned his neck up and pressed his lips against Hugh's. He kissed him as full and deep as their years together demanded.

Hugh felt as happy as he'd ever been, like their souls touched for just a moment. As they pulled apart, he saw Simon smiling at him. Then everything clouded over.

~

The giant man-creatures stood upright suddenly, then dropped one by one to the ground. Lyle and Suz checked them: they were definitely dead.

Katy went to the security guard's desk to get a chair and smashed through the front door. As she was about to step through, Sprague asked her to wait. "I have to go do something," he said over his shoulder as headed for the elevators.

Fleur rushed to where Simon lay, holding Hugh close. "He's okay," said Simon, "but he's gone."

Chapter 28

The ferry rocked gently under an even grey sky as it crawled over the dark water to the island. Inside the boat, Simon sat holding Fleur's hand. A little girl of four held Fleur's other hand. She had Simon's curly black hair and Fleur's pretty round face. A seagull landed on a railing outside the window opposite them, and the girl let go of her mother's hand and ran to look at the bird. Fleur followed her in an easy but protective way.

Simon looked at the woman across the aisle from him. She was dressed for the city, probably visiting some hippy relative who'd taken sanctuary on the island, or just taking time away for herself because she'd heard the place was peaceful. Simon had heard that, too. She spread anti-anxiety cream on her neck and forehead. That was just one of the products to result from the plunder of Indigenics' abandoned facilities by its former competitors. To their disappointment, they found that all the cloning research had been lost, destroyed by someone.

~

"Trineh, come back here," said Fleur to the little girl, who ran back to her mother and father. They walked together up the little paved road that climbed from the ferry landing. The wind off the water blew rainy mist into their faces.

A chicken hopped up from the ditch and crossed in front of them. Simon smiled, first at the improbability of ever seeing such a thing back home in the city, then at the recollection that just the other day his daughter had told him the old joke about the chicken, as proud as if it were the first time it had ever been told. "So," Simon asked his daughter, "why *did* it cross the road?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders, her tiny yellow raincoat bunching up around her face, then picked up a pebble from the ground and hurled it at the chicken. Her aim was impeccable, and the bird squawked and fluttered as it ran away. Fleur fought the urge to laugh as she scolded the girl: with an arm like that, she was definitely Simon's daughter.

Simon rubbed his shoulder through his jacket. He'd taken a hard hit in yesterday's game. But that hadn't stopped him from getting the winning goal against British Columbia's team. That was their fourth national championship win in a row. His stellar abilities had drawn attention to the sport, which drew new money and endorsement opportunities. It was an upward spiral, and he was riding it. The trip across the country also gave him an opportunity to finally take this detour.

They crested the hill, and a small store came into view. When they stepped up onto its front porch, Fleur held Trineh up to read the notices on the bulletin board outside, where the local artisans, craftspeople, and gardeners offered services, classes, and goods to each other. Simon stepped inside the general store, looking around the cramped space at the housewares, staple foods, gardening supplies, and the bottles of liquor behind the front cash. He asked the large woman sitting there if she knew Hugh Willard.

"Who?"

"Hu— He came here a few years ago. Guy with amnesia?"

"Oh, Mister W, the teacher," she said.

"Really?" Simon smiled. "Uh, yeah, where is he?"

"Just follow the road right past the store and go about a quarter of a mile. You'll see a blue house where he lives and teaches classes. He's probably studying. He's always studying something."

"Thanks," said Simon, already half out the creaky spring door.

Simon reached for Fleur's hand. "I found him."

Fleur didn't take his hand. "You go," she said with a smile. "See him."

Simon nodded, then ran, heading up the uneven road. The pavement gave way to a gravel powder that crunched under his sneakers.

It was easy to find the house — there were so few of them along this road compared to the suburban street that his new house was on, and the houses here were all spread so far apart. He felt his pulse quicken as he spotted the wood-shingled building. He slowed down, and instead of heading for the door eased his way up to one of the mismatched windows. He peered inside. Just as with Hugh's old place, there wasn't much furniture inside. But where Hugh's apartment's furniture had been expensively simple and urban the pieces cluttered around this space were all old, wooden, and rickety. Also completely unlike his old home was the proliferation of books stacked along the walls and in great piles on the floor. Charts, maps, and posters were taped up, too, scribbled on with fat marker lines and dotted with push-pins. Hugh had three hotbox terminals, all on and flashing information.

It was as if Hugh was trying to learn everything, like a caterpillar filling its cocoon with navigational flight plans. Simon smiled.

Suddenly Hugh stepped into sight, crossing the room. Simon pulled himself flat to one side of the window. Slowly, he eased back and looked in.

~

Hugh felt something and looked up. He turned his head and saw someone looking in his window. Some day he'd figure out why he had these insights and ideas that others didn't. He felt something, a feeling like he knew this man already. *Probably just another visitor from the city*, he figured.

The man waved, embarrassed. Hugh smiled and waved back. Then he turned back to his studies. He was on the verge of something, he just knew it.

Colophon

This book was designed, printed, and bound by the author in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2006.

~

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